

Lost Legacy

by Andrithir

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Summary: There are stories about them, myths and legends of once majestic species overseeing the galaxy and exploring into the space that lay beyond. There were stories about them, tales of faded past. Humanity's missing link. (Rewrite Chapters 1 to 3 now posted)
COMPLETED. Rewrites are on hiatus.

1. Fall of Earth (Rewrite)

****REWRITE COMMENCED: 15/06/2013****

****REWRITE POSTED ON: 14/07/2013****

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****A/N:** You know that rewrite I have been promising? Well now it's here. This is a treat for those who've put up with the first few chapters to get to the good stuff. It's high time I've gotten all the chapters up to the same calibre as my more recent ones.**

****I'm also doing a tech change. This is also the Chief's chapter. Next Chapter will have Shepard's time to shine.****

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Plot Summary:****

The Precursors had defied the Reapers. In their infinite wisdom, the Precursors had surpassed the ancient machines. With their purpose under threat, The Reapers receded, gone into the darkness that lay between galaxies. But there was one thing the flawed machines could never understand, something beyond their comprehension. They could only see in black and white, right and wrong, they were incapable of seeing an alternative, a third path.

So devoted to their beliefs that life would be crushed under machines, the Reapers sought to preserve through stagnation and destruction. Never could the Reapers imagine, never could they understand that the created did not need to be machine to surpass its creator.

Even after the fall of the Precursors, and galactic extinction at the hands of the Forerunners, the Reapers still failed to understand. Arrogance was not limited to biological life, but to sentient existence.

Within Gaia's flesh, an ancient and harrowing legacy will be revealed.

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"_Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood â€" Personal Journal_

March 7, 2553

The war is over, it's finally over. Words cannot convey how relieved I am that it has finally passed. But it has come at such a high cost. Billions of humans dead and hundreds of our colonies burning, and amongst them are some of our greatest heroes.

Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 is missing in action, presumed dead alongside with the AI Cortana. Posthumously, we've promoted him to the rank of Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. Under the circumstances, it's the best that we can do.

Now we must rebuild what we have left, restart commerce and pray that we won't have to face another crisis of the magnitude. Too many friendly faces have been lost, never will I see them again.

We've lost so much, but scars like these will never fade. They will heal, close over and become a part of who we are, but they will never be forgotten. The war is finally over.

September 18, 2553

The Sangheili are fighting the remanent of the Covenant. We are doing our best to supply them and keep them in the fight, but without vital information on their ships, we are at a lost on how to repair them. I can only hope that if this is a war of attrition, the Elites will prevail.

Alongside the Separatists, we have formed a Coalition in order to meet future threats together.

Our expeditionary forces have located more and more Forerunner Archives filled with information. Our scientists and scholars are doing whatever they can to piece together this enigmatic and powerful race. I've been told by some of our leading scientists that from what it seem the Forerunners had left behind their creations for us.

_There is much locked away in the sea of information, and it will be only a matter of time before we learn them all. Additional funding has been allocated towards overhauling our military. Scientists are looking into ways of producing smaller, cheaper and more efficient

direct-energy weapons._

January 5, 2554

The fight against the Insurrectionists has restarted. ONISAD Teams are fighting bushfire wars against the rebel cells. Reports have also confirmed that the Insurrectionists have enlisted the help of Secessionists. We don't have the resources to fight them all at the same time, and they know it.

ONI officials have told me that Operations are expanding towards former colonies. I can only imagine the hell our people are going through. I know for a fact that decimated terrain is unforgiving and horrible to fight in.

For the sake of the people, we've done our best to keep it all off radar. Everyone's been scared enough. The chaps in ONISAD know what they signed up for; I just wish that what they're going through is not more than what they can handle.

I'm starting to see too many Intelligence Officers visiting the psych clinics.

March 18, 2555

I'll just say it, something is rotten in ONI. Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky has recently passed awayâ€| that's something I cannot accept. She's not that much older than me. I may not like the woman, but they said she died in her sleep, on the night she had a meeting with ONI Admins.

_The UNSC still has a hold on emergency powers, thus we still are in control of _everything_. But that's giving the Insurrectionists more clout, and I'm also not liking what ONI is undergoing right now. The Head of the Intelligence Organisation is now Admiral Serin Osman (whom I gather is a washed out Spartan-II candidate)._

Everything Dr Halsey has done for us has now been twisted by the media. These are unconfirmed rumours, but they've gained enough momentum for it to be a threat to the stability of humanity. Maybe I've been out of the loop or out of touch with a lot of things, but these rumours have been circulating for quite some time now.

I fear ONI is trying to initiate a takeover by starting the rumours. Under Directive 251RCC, I am relinquishing emergency powers and turning ONI into a mixed military and civilian organisation.

I wish Lieutenant Colonel Doctor Essingdon Keyes was promoted to Head of ONI. The boy has far more skill and talent than any other Deputy Chiefs.

October 14, 2555

I have received word from the Arbiter that the war against the Brutes is not going so well. They have taken heavy losses. I have told him that I will send aid as soon as possible. But the Arbiter has said not to rush, for three decades of warfare has driven Humanity to the brink of destruction.

I wish the Elites all of the best.

December 4, 2557

_It's been a long tough year; I haven't had much time to write. But it's a mix of good news and bad. The UNSC _Infinity_ had been commissioned this year. She is an impressive ship and the pride of our Navy. Her official mission will be to explore uncharted areas and located Forerunner Artefacts, her unofficial mission is to find and neutralise all Elites that pose a threat to the Arbiter, whilst finding and aiding in the decommissioning of the Halo Rings._

Despite a few unforeseen incidents, the ship has performed admirably. And on top of that, they have recovered MCPON John-117.

That was the good news of the year. And now the bad.

We are at war with a Forerunner splinter group as if we didn't have enough on our hands already. And to make matters worse, Doctor Catherine Halsey has defected to the Covenant Remnant. Hell, I didn't even know she was alive until Captain Lasky had briefed me. (I prefer Lasky over Del Rio; the man knows how to lead and respects the Spartans).

I went to Keyes to talk about his mother, and I had wondered if he knew she was still alive. When I saw him, he was livid. His work colleagues had told me that he was practically screaming for Palmer's head on a pike. But as quickly as his temper flared, it all disappeared under a mask.

He's planning something. Just as brilliant as his mother and a master tactician like his father. The boy is working himself to death.

January 22, 2560

We have more Forerunner Archives located deep within shield worlds and Micro Dyson Spheres, in them, we have learnt more efficient ways of slipspace travel, the science behind Beam Weapons, Forerunner Dreadnoughts, Forerunner power cells, Forerunner History and so much more. We have just made the greatest technological leap in all of mankind.

I have read through some of the Archives, I can't believe the history that is filled in these Archives. Apparently, prehistoric humanity was space faring, and equivalent in power to the Forerunners, unbelievable. It also saddens me to discover that humanity was devolved after their defeat in the Human-Forerunner War.

It is also revealed within the Archives that there are more alien species out there than expected. What came to my attention are unisex species such as the Asari, and another, the Prothean, it stated that they are extremely intelligent and capable of transferring complex concepts through mere touch; it is quite possible that they are the ones who rose to power after the disappearance of the Forerunners.

_According to the Archives, the Protheans are or were a noble, mantle

like race, just like the Forerunners. However I couldn't speculate much since the Archives had ceased to update since reseeding the galaxy was completed. But now, since our "return" to the Archives, did it start to collect more information._

A sidenote is that we've discovered something that the Archive's refer to as Dark Energy Manipulation. Basically, it is live hosts controlling dark energy through movements of their bodies. I don't know what this means for our military. Our scientists haven't done much research into this specific field, and we're not too sure where to begin. The archive's fails to mention anything more.

Our scientists have already begun research into combining hardlight and ion weaponry for mass production. With the aid of the additional information cache, estimates have placed total military overhaul at five years.

December 25, 2562

This is something our scientists have been working on for a very long time, but with the aid of LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Keyes we have finally done it. With the use of bio-nanites and positronic brain lattice implants, we are now able to increase the physical capabilities of the average human and annul all elements that cause ageing. In shortâ€¦ we have achieved eternal youth.

However, this is something that cannot be passed down from parent to offspring. Recommended age to undertake these implants is 35 and above.

We've also begun further research into improving powered exoskeletons for our regular infantryman as well as beginning the development of cheap-reusable energy shield generators. On another note, combat research has concluded that due to constraints, MGs, cannons and assault rifles should be upgraded to DEW tech. Pistols, SMGs and sniper rifles will be restricted to regular projectiles for concealment purposes.

January 1, 2565

Under Directive-2239DF, the UNSC High Command and the UEG Council has approved the mass recruitment/training of Spartan-IVs. The SPARTAN Branch will still remain as is because of its expeditionary nature. I can hope that this curbs some of the bravado that other branches find off-putting.

_Units affected by this directive are the 1__st__ Airborne Division, selected members of the 105__th__ Dropjet Division, ONISAD Special Operations Group_

March 5, 2567

Sangheilos has fallen. There's no easier way to put it. Out of nowhere, the Covenant has resurfaced with a new addition to their ranks, the Yahg. They are equally aggressive and large as the Brute. We cannot stand and fight them. We'll have to run. Plans have already been made to relocate to the Halo Rings and the rebuilt Arks. Yes, plural. The irony of it all has been lost on many of us, but not me. I guess that says a lot about me.

I wonder what my wife would think, I wish she was still with me. Wherever she is, I hope she doesn't have to see this.

The Coalition-Covenant War has begun.

February 7, 2568

Earth is on the brink of destruction; our combined navies are down to 35% combat effective. 8% reduction from last year. The surprise attack had wiped out most of our non-developed navy.

The UEG and I believe that we should enact a Hammer-Down protocol, and I agree with them fully.

Nuclear weapons have been detonated all over Earth in order to halt the Brute-Yahg advance. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

I have also enacted emergency protocols. Due to the extreme losses we are undertaking, all Special Force E-7 ranks and higher will be promoted to CO of accordance.

Elites and ONISAD have also managed to pinpoint Yahg and Brute colonies. I have ordered Nova Warhead Missiles to be fired at them, this could be considered a War crime, but this is humanity's darkest hour. Slipspace capabilities further increase the devastating effects these weapons have. I can only imagine so many colonies going up in flames.

But it's something that must be done if we're to survive.

_Hammer-Down Protocols have been enacted; it is our last resort for contingency plans. Despite having pinpointed our enemy's homeworlds, we cannot guarantee that our weapons will wipe them all out."

>_**-Extracts from the **__**Personal Journal of (UNSC Navy) Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood**_

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EARTH, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

This war, it had gone on for too long. _Too damn long_. He had _hoped_ that he had done his part and that peace was achieved. But they were wrong, they were all wrong. Just when everything simmered down, there would always be something to disrupt the calm. Humanity's increasingly delicate and fragile order of conflicting interests never allowed a peaceful decade to go by. Simply expanding into the stars didn't change the cycle of human life. It just made it more insanely elaborate.

Sure the introduction of cold-fusion had alleviated a large number of problems, but in their stead worse ones took their place. To simply believe an extremely-varied specie to live peacefully in their space-faring stage was just too much to hope for. True individualism and false individualism all conflicted with one another. And when humanity's test came, it was almost too much to bear.

Though debatable whether man's own self-conflicted nature aided him

against the fight against the Covenant, there was no denying that it was more than just a thorn in the side.

The Theocracy of a Conglomerate of Aliens was no different either. They mirrored humanity that it was uncanny. They possessed man's brutal nature, his brilliant mind, his ambitious greed and his heart.

When man fought the Covenant, he was fighting against himself, his own ideology that once existed so many centuries ago.

These were the thoughts of Commander John-117 as he reflected on how far humanity had come, just to end up like this all over again. The Covenant was back and in greater numbers too. Hundreds if not thousands of planets were irreversibly damaged just to breed the Loyalist species back to overwhelming numbers.

The Coalition had been caught off guard, and in just a matter of a few weeks, so many colonies were overrun by the horde.

Earth, Earth was all that was left. Reach had fallen, but instead of being burned to ash and glass, her lands were trampled and flattened.

"John?" Kelly placed a gauntleted hand on his shoulder, "it's time to go."

He looked up into her warm brown eyes; thoughts interrupted, and gave a nod. She turned to slide on her helmet, the air seals hissing shut. John used the rung to his left and pulled himself up from the crate he was sitting on, and eased his helmet over his head.

John walked to the door and pushed it open gently, the soil beneath his boots gave way as he walked across the uncovered floor of the bunker. The dark damp cave carve-out served as an outpost for the wounded to be dropped off at. He felt that there was a certain irony being dragged into the ground and waiting for an unknown fate.

Anybody who could still hold a gun and aim were still on the frontlines. The ones that lay in the dirt or on stretchers were torn up beyond recognitions. Most of the blunt trauma and bleeding injuries were caused by berserking Brutes who loved to get in close to use their blades and fangs.

"Linda and Fred are outside," Kelly said.

John checked his HUD. He had incoming orders and flicked his status to accept them.

"C-Two wants us to support the defence on Mount Sam Enterprises Tower," the Chief said, "we'll be able to cover the evacuation from there."

Despite being a Commander, the term "Chief" had stuck. Personally, John didn't mind. He knew the importance of morale and did whatever he could to boost it "within reason of course."

He moved outside of the bunker and took cover behind a large boulder. All the trees on this hillside had been stripped bare, only ash and

charcoal remained. Down in the harbour below, was the cacophony of war. Multi-role attack fighters screamed overhead and readjusted their attack vectors for a gun run.

"Objective is four klicks north of our position," John said, updating the team's battlenet. "We evict the Covies, and evac will have less to worry about."

"Let's do this."

Blue Team began their approach by leap-frogging downhill. Bits of glass and burnt branches were crushed beneath the heels of their boots as they dashed from cover to cover. Even with the full support of all available assets, the occasional Banshee sortie managed to break through and wreak hell before it was shot down.

Turning his gaze skyward, the Spartan could see the Banshees inbound on an attack run, and the huge backdrop of _Campton_ hovering over the Sydney Harbour. The ship's point-defence guns were blazing, lighting up the moonless night sky as the crew worked overtime to provide desperately needed fire support.

"Incoming Banshee! Target two hundred metres north west, high!" Fred gestured.

"I got it!" Linda breathed coolly.

She gently pivoted her rifle and spun the barrel to bear. At the squeeze of the trigger, she let fly the feared Raufoss round. The bullet drilled into the hull, detonated in a fiery ball of zinchromium thermite expelled the tungsten dart into the pilot. The Banshee careened to the left, smoke coughing out of the ragged hole torn into its side.

"We're clear."

"_Chief,"_ it was Cortana over the COM, the AI was deployed on the UNSC _Campton_, an Infinity Class Cruiser. _"You've got multiple hostiles converging towards Outpost Echo-Two. Hunter-Two-Four has been rerouted to secondary. Command needs you to pick up the ball on this."_

"Copy," John replied, "egressing to secondary."

Blue team made their way down the hillside, and encroached upon the hillside mansions that overlooked the Darling Harbour. What was once as renowned as a place of symphonic art, commerce and life, was now a cacophony of war and death.

Stray rounds streaked through the air, leaving a colourful trail in their wake. Cannons echoed in the distance, their rounds drilling through the tower buildings, and aircrafts soared through skies filled with savage energy. Despite being physically frailer than most of the Covenant species, humanity had always dominated ground warfare.

The conglomerate theology had become lethargic and complacent, relying heavily on orbital support for long-range work. Covenant ground-forces always loved a close-quarter fight. But here, on Earth, they'd have to _walk_ to get there. UNSC combat doctrine had a

preference to long-range engagements. The Covenant may have the punch, but the UNSC had the reach. With the help of the Sangheili Navy, the UNSC Naval Assets could hold their own in space.

"I've got hostiles on sensor," Kelly said.

"Move to engage," John ordered.

Blue team activated their optical camo, disappearing from sight and sensors. A Covenant Lance was advancing down a boulevard overlooking a small harbour filled with gutted yahts. Blue team moved into an L-shaped ambushing position and waited until all targets were within visual sight.

"Weapons free," John whispered over TEAMCOM.

Covenant soldiers fell without warning, and without a sound. Nothing was more detrimental to morale than watching a comrade fall silently, with only smouldering wounds and smoke curling up from melted armour. Grunts cried in fear and spun on their axis. Jackals squawked and looked around with their keen eyes to spot their assailants. But there was no use.

More Covenant soldiers crumbled like stringless puppets. They didn't make a sound as their bodies hit the boulevard.

John zeroed in on the Yahg leader; he trained his sights onto the massive alien's ugly tri-shaped mouth. The alien was roaring orders to his subordinates, telling them to fan out and fire aimlessly. Ghostly green blobs and purple crystalline shards flew through the night and splashed harmlessly onto the towering walls of the Sydney streets. But none failed to hit the Spartan team.

Squeezing the trigger, the Yahg stopped moving. His eyes rolled back and listlessly fell into a heap. He didn't topple in a certain direction, and by the time he fell, the impact marks didn't give a clue to where the shooter was. The Grunts began to panic, firing wildly into the air.

Satisfied that all the hard targets were dealt with, the Spartans turned their weapons on the lighter troops. In the span of a few seconds, scores of Jackals fell and the methane tanks on the Grunts exploded. Gore and bluish blood covered the streets accompanied with scorch marks.

"We're clear," Kelly said, checking her sensors.

John cycled through another clip and slid it home in his rifle. Laser weapons were definitely a thing of beauty in his opinion. Unlike the Spartan laser, the standard issue on the Fulton & Rasch FR Superior Combat Assault Rifle (SCAR) and DEW Sniper Rifles virtually made no sound and no light signature. They were literally undetectable with the laser setting.

Making another sweep with his sensors, the team was in the all clear and moved on.

"Friendlies up ahead, John," Kelly said, gesturing to a platoon of UNSC Marines.

The Chief quickly jogged over towards them, disengaged cloak, and took cover behind a concrete cinder block.

"What's the situation Lieutenant?"

"We've got an Airborne chalk pinned down just one hundred metres from us," she replied, with distinctive broad Australian accent. "We're waiting on more ground drones to support us before we move forward."

"Logistics have been shot up," Fred supplied.

John turned to the Lieutenant. Her eyes were sunken with defeat, but she was not going to down without a fight. "Hold this position, and head to evac in ten, we'll take it from here."

"Yes, sir."

Waving Blue Team forward, the Chief lead them through the once majestic homes. The three-storey mansions were all shot up, windows shattered and charred; some were even covered in blood from both sides.

"Sniper!" Kelly cried, as a lance splashed onto her shields, draining it fully.

The team threw themselves to the floor and rolled behind cover, a mere half second later, an energy beam streaked through the air and grazed passed John's shields.

"Target, front right," Fred called out, "fifty metres, marking."

A red dot appeared on John's hud.

"He's got cloak," the Spartan said, noticing his armour's sensors didn't pick up a signature.

"I got him," Linda said.

She levelled her anti-material sniper rifle, zeroed in on the mark and squeezed the trigger. The Jackal immediately winked back into existence as the tungsten dart tore through his torso, ripping him into a bloodied mess. There was probably concrete mixed with the pulpy mass as well considering that Linda had used a Raufoss round.

"Target down," she said coolly.

The team moved up in a fanned out diamond formation, interlocking their field of fire as they moved from building to building. As they neared the pinned Chalk, the roar of gunfire intensified.

"They're just around the corner, fifty metres up the block," Kelly said.

John quickly formulated a plan of attack.

"Linda, provide overwatch from that rooftop," he pointed to a house with part of its roof blown off.

Her green acknowledgement light winked. The team sniper gracefully leapt across an overturned car, and used her suit's jumpjet pack to reach the elevated position. Pushing a few fallen beams and torn furniture around, Linda formed a suitable firing position which would be able to hide her signature and provide a reasonable amount of cover.

"I've got a bead on enemy targets. Engaging," she said over TEAMCOM.

John turned to his team, "let's move. Fred, hang back and cover our six."

"Copy."

Leap frogging their way through the sea of overturned vehicles and smouldering piles of rubble, the Chief lead his team down the road, and turned left onto a town square. The area was roughly the size of four sports stadiums, in the centre was a raging battle.

Men from the 2nd Airborne Division fired lances of cobalt blue at the enemies, keeping the horde at bay with terrifying accuracy.

"This is Spartan Blue Team," John broadcasted over a secure channel.

"_This is Chalk Eight, we're pinned down by enemy forces,"_ came the reply. It was a middle aged man; he sounded like he was at his limits, but only held together by a determined sense of duty to those under his command. The Spartan could hear the chatter of gunfire and the frantic cries of wounded men.

"Sit tight, we're approaching from the south."

"_Copy that."_

The link was terminated. John panned his eyes across the square; the fire fight was so heavy and frantic that the Covenant soldiers failed to notice their own getting shot down by Linda. John caught the faint outline of the bullet wake as the round passed through smoke and bore deep into Yahg flesh.

John broke cover and sprinted along the boulevard, weapon raised. He literally ploughed through a group of Grunts. Their tanks ruptured, and their skin torn by shattered bone. Kelly and Fred followed in close behind, crushing the small aliens into pulp beneath the heel of the boots.

The Spartans squeezed the trigger, and in a matter of seconds scores of Brutes and Yahg jerked violently as their bodies were shredded and cooked by a heavy volume of cobalt energy beams.

A Brute Chieftain roared in a bloodlust raged, and raised his hammer for a charge. He had only taken four steps before his chest was turned into a mangled mess of bone and gore. John sent another silent thanks to Linda.

Taking cover behind a truck, the Spartans hosed the enemy position with accurate fire. Only then, did the Covenant know that the Spartans were there. Needler shards glanced off the metal surface off

the truck, leaving a trail of luminescent violet in their wake. Spiker rounds pierced the alloy and glowed in the night, slowly dimming as they shed their heat and warped the hull.

Although Mendez had drilled it into the Spartans to take cover whenever they were shot at. John forced every fibre in his being not to bow down to instinct. He needed to put a little faith in the armour Halsey had designed for him. The dual layer shielding bore the brunt of plasma fire, flaring gold as it dissipated the savage energy.

He stuck to his gruesome task, cycling through clips whenever necessary and kept the pressure on the Covenant horde. Alongside his Spartan brothers and sisters, John managed to cut down dozens of the tri-mouthed _split-lips_ " as the Marines called them " and scores of Grunts.

Jackals armed with energy shields rushed forward and formed a testudo like formation. It allowed them to advance on the Airborne and Spartan position.

"Strafe right," John barked, in an attempt to link up with the downed Chalk.

Kelly was the first to leave cover, drawing a heavy volume of fire. But she was fast and the shots splashed harmlessly in the trail of dust that followed her wake. Upon reaching another defensible position behind a fallen statue, did she stop and return fire.

"Flashbang out!" she cried.

Tossing the incapacitating grenade over the Covenant, Kelly ducked behind cover and waited for the quick succession of explosions. The blinding flash and deafening clap went off simultaneously. Covenant soldiers were far more sensitive to light and sound, especially the Jackals, their resistance to flashbangs were appalling by human standards.

Grunts and Jackals alike stumbled aimlessly over one another as their senses failed them. Seeing this as the prime opportunity, John and Fred tossed frags into the enemy's midst, before loading a round into their grenade launchers.

A dull thump rolled across the ground, the powerful shockwave hurled limbs and bodies across the churned grass while hypervelocity shrapnel pierced through exposed flesh. Dozens of enemy combatants went down in mere seconds. Finally, the two Spartans delivered the killing blow, by firing their launchers.

The high explosive grenades arced through the air, and detonated into the ragged ranks of the Covenant. Yahgs and Brutes were thrown into the sky, and landed with a sickening thud on the rubble.

"We're clear," Kelly shouted.

"_Chief, no more hostiles in the immediate area,"_ Linda said.

"Copy, double time to our position."

"Roger that."

John jogged over to the Chalks. Their Warthogs were a mangled mess of warped metal and shattered glass, all covered in blood. Men sat against the walls, blood seeping out of their wounds. There wasn't enough biofoam to go around. These men would've most likely applied the lifesaving compound to escaping civilians. Kelly went to work and did whatever she could, but the most she could do was give the men morphine.

"Cavalry has arrived," one of the soldiers said.

The men looked at the Spartans, hope filled their eyes. But John knew it just wasn't enough. Hope can do wondrous things, but these men had seen so many words burn, so many friends slip, they were all so tired. He turned towards the CO, Major Tim Hastings.

"How bad?" the Chief asked.

Part of Hastings's helmet had been cracked by a Spiker round ricocheting off of it. John could see the dried blood and cacked mud on his hands.

"Four dead, five critical," the Major answered.

Pulling out the map on his HUD, the Spartan examined the most optimal route to Outpost Echo-Two. If he could get the Chalks to the outpost, he would have access to more men help him take on his primary.

"Gather your men, and stay close, we'll walk you out," John ordered.

"Yes, sir."

The Airborne mounted whatever functioning vehicle remained, and prepared to drive out.

"Linda, ride third Warthog."

"Got it."

All the men able to walk and fight took up formations around the five remained Hogs, and followed the Spartans to safety. The troop moved around overturned vehicles and over piles of burning rubble as they trudged down the road. Bodies, both civilian and combatant alike lay in the streets with grievous wounds, filling the drains with blood.

"We've got a live one," an Airborne soldier said, gesturing to a fallen Yahg.

"Not anymore," another soldier said coldly. He drew his sidearm, and planted a round into the hulking alien's head. The explosive force from the bullet tore off the horn and squashed brain matter onto the melted asphalt road.

No remorse was shown for any enemy that relentlessly threw itself at humanity. They didn't care if they got wounded or killed, so long as

they performed a deed that made them appear worthy in their gods' eyes, they didn't care.

"Sniper!"

A lance of energy burned through the Airborne Soldier's shields, and boiled away his armour. It wasn't a lethal hit, but he would be out of the fight.

"Get fire. Linda, trace!" John ordered.

"Contact left!" a Sergeant cried.

"Enemies moving in on our left! Light them up!" Hastings ordered.

Gunners swung their menacing M888 HMG on the incoming force. The deafening roar and the smell of ozone filled the air as the ion-hardlight hybrid weapons unleashed a torrent of savage energy down range.

Grunts danced from one foot to the other before being cooked in the very spot they stood. Brutes didn't stand any better as they were easy targets for the big guns. The heavy machine guns tore through the Jackal's armed shields as if there was nothing there.

"Target, eight o'clock high. In the cafÃ© balcony!" a soldier gestured.

A gunner spun his gun round and hosed the entire building. Sparks were sent flying as melted metal showered the furniture. Nothing inside the cafÃ© could've survived such an onslaught.

"CafÃ©'s clear!" a soldier said, scanning it with his sensors.

"Area clear!"

"Move out!"

The group of UNSC soldiers eventually reached allied territory, held by a mixed group of Sangheili lead forces and UNSC Marines. The CBD was so heavily damaged that glass lay on the streets as if it had been snowing. Wounded men and women were being carted away onto dropships, waiting to take them away to medical centres in orbit.

"_Chief, Outpost Echo-Two is getting mighty jumpy right now," _Cortana said over the channels.

"We're two klicks out," John replied. "We'll get there sharpish."

The Warthogs came to a halt, and off loaded all their wounded into a makeshift hospital.

"I need a fresh team," the Chief barked.

"We'll take ball," said an ODST Platoon leader, Lieutenant Jake Tenshu.

"How many men do you have?"

"Forty men, ready to go."

"Get to Outpost Echo-Two," John ordered, "they need help asap."

"Yes sir."

The ODSRs quickly rallied together at the centre of the courtyard, before departing for the motor pool. Satisfied that the team would take up the slack, John radioed Cortana.

"Relay to C-Two, Outpost Echo-Two will be receiving reinforcements. Piper Three-Eight is on approach for assist."

"_Copy that Chief,"_ there was a pause, _"how come they didn't sign in earlier?"_

"Remnant force."

"_I see. Out."_

John pulled up the tactical map over his HUD again. There were no definite frontline, everything was in flux. But the all Covenant forces were converging on Mount Sam Enterprises Tower en masse. Defence Contractors had yet to be evacuated from the building, word has it that they were working on a scaled down Halo Array weapon. Nothing was concrete, but if the real reason held half as much clout as the rumour did, then the whole Covenant Armada would be bearing down on that building.

"Blue Team, rally on me, we're going to primary," John broadcasted.

"Let's do this," Kelly chimed.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**HADRIEL **_**â€" **_**INFINITY-CLASS **_**CRUISER, IN ORBIT OF EARTH****

Hood kept his gaze on the tactical display, so far the fleets were holding. Already the first wave of evacuation ship had made it to the rallying point. Just a few more hours until the Coalition could retreat and enact a Hammer-Down Protocol.

"Aneira, plot a course to this navpoint," Hood said, entering in the coordinates on the display.

"Yes, Admiral," the feminine voice complied.

The Admiral felt the ship shift beneath him as its engine flared. Every so often, he would hear the dull thud as the shields absorbed an attack. _Charon_-class light frigates took up defensive positions around the ship, keeping an even rate of fire on enemy vessels, warding off any boarding parties.

Terrence examined the battle map again, and sent out orders to his naval groups. The UNSC ships moved into a pincer formation with Sangheili ships by their side. Covenant vessels flew straight into

the mouth of hell as they were fired upon from numerous directions.

The lead _CAS_-Assault Carrier barely warmed up its turrets before being gutted from stem to stern. A salvo from the UNSC _Infinity_'s main gun smashed through the nose of the Covenant ship, shattering the head and punching through the reactor core before passing out the other end. It looked like two white-blue lances had skewered through a half dozen Heavy-Capital ships. Seconds later, the ships' superstructure caved in and the reactor core exploded, tearing them asunder and hurling molten metal out like a fiery flower. Something like that should've been terrifying and crushing for enemy morale. But Hood knew better, the Covenant was relentless, spurred on by the belief that the Great Journey awaited them.

"Sir, we have a firing solution," the Principle Weapons Officer said.

"Light 'em up, Ensign," Hood ordered.

Lieutenant Commander Emma Gibbs gave a nod to confirm the order, as per standard protocol.

"Firing solution acquired," the Peewo and Aneira said simultaneously.

"Fire."

All four guns were fired in quick succession, hurling multiple hypervelocity rounds into the Covenant formation. None of the ships had time to react before a gaping hole was punched through their hull.

"Multiple kills, and multiple critical hits," Aneira said with some mirth. "Group Four-Charlie firing salvo."

The assortment of Cruisers and Destroyers lined up on their targets, and fired their missile pods. Hundreds of plumes of smoke trailed into space and found their mark. Warheads detonated, rippling against Covenant ships and draining them completely. Then the group opened fire with their Ion Canons. Dozens more ships joined their derelict friends, impeding enemy movement.

"Hadley, how much longer until everyone is off planetside?" Hood asked.

"One hour, sir," the Ensign answered.

God help us all.

****XXxxXX****

****MOUNT SAM ENTERPRISES TOWER, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, EARTH****

"Enemy armour, left!" a soldier roared.

"Enemy armour, copy. Target acquired," an anti-tank soldier acknowledged.

A plume of smoke trailed behind the missile from his shoulder. The

High-Explosive Armour-Piercing warhead slammed into the purple hull and detonated. A stream of molten thermite burned through the armour and burned the crew alive, a split second before the thunderous force ripped everything apart. A column of thick black smoke flowed out from the twisted slag and rose high into the sky.

"Enemy armour down."

John left the foxhole and entered the main foyer of the building. Everywhere, staff members were carting off valuable technology to the evacuation centres, or relaying priceless data.

"Chief, we've got enemy inbound, they're dropping in on the roof. Get up there now!" a Major General ordered. "We need to buy them more time."

"Yes sir."

Using the maintenance shafts in the lifts, the team managed to reach the rooftop in time to help the defenders fend off another assault. But the rooftop was not a simple flat surface with a few penthouse structures, heavy fighting had caused the upper two floors to collapse, creating an uneven terrain of shattered concrete and broken furniture.

Surveying the area, John found that the Marines had formed a chokepoint defensive perimeter to catch the Covenant in a killing field. But he also found a couple of bodies crushed under the might of the Gravity Hammer.

"Glad you could make it sir," Captain Henley said, but he was quickly cut off. "Enemy air assault in bound! Knock that Phantom out!"

A Corporal shouldering SAM launcher levelled the weapon and zeroed his sights on the dropship. At the squeezed of the trigger, the missile exited the tube, leaving a trail of wispy white smoke in its wake. Seconds later, the Phantom shuddered under the impact and slowly careened out of the sky and slammed into an adjacent building.

But the Covenant was not yet defeated. Banshees swooped, showering the area with plasma bolts. Rebars melted, sparks were sent flying and molten concrete pooled onto the floor.

"Take cover!" a Lieutenant ordered.

Men and women threw themselves behind whatever cover they could, UNSC Sappers threw up hardlight shields to absorb the brunt of the gun run, but it wasn't enough. Plasma burned through the light cover and overloaded the Marines' shields.

As the Banshees cleared and the eeries howls became distant, John could hear the blood curling cries of the soldiers. A medic dragged a woman with both her legs blown off. He had injected her with a dose of painkillers, but still her cries were evident whenever he pulled her over a bump.

"Sound off!" the Captain called.

"Lieutenant Williams is down!"

"I'm fucked up but I'm still up," a woman said.

"Triple-Eight's out!"

"Out of missiles!"

"Incoming assault!"

John's HUD lighted up the incoming Phantoms in red. He trained his SCAR onto the lead dropship and waited for the drop doors to open.

"Linda, see if you can do something about Company."

"Got it."

The sniper set up her anti-material weapon, and loaded a Raufoss magazine into the Gauss Weapon. John couldn't tell which ship she had targeted first, but after a quick succession of shots, two had suffered catastrophic engine failures and crash landed onto the roof.

The Marines were quick to respond as they lobbed frags into areas where the dropships would've most likely landed. A few seconds later, they were rewarded by dull explosions and pained cries.

"Engaging next target," Linda said coolly.

She unloaded all the remaining rounds in her clip, kicking up dust from around her and filling the air with a thunderous clap. Sparks danced off the Phantom's hull as the Raufoss rounds detonated and punched through its armour. John guessed that the pilot had been killed as the dropship began to bank wildly before crashing into a platform in front of him.

Immediately, the Marines turned all their guns onto the craft and unloaded round after round. The soldiers inside never stood a chance.

"_This is Fireteam Theta, we're currently under heavy attack. Need assist, over."_

"We'll handle this, Captain," John said, he then switched his channels. "_Fireteam Theta, this is Spartan Blue Team, we're on our way_"

A Nav marker appeared on John's HUD as he ran through the mire of rubble to get to the stricken fireteam on the other side. He made it to a balcony area, overlooking the entire Sydney CBD.

Already a number of berserking Brutes were causing all kinds of hell, firing upon them would risk friendly fire. Fred was the first one to shoot off. With a shotgun in one hand and a combat knife in the other, he took on the ape-like creatures. He blasted a Brute Minor in the face with the semi-auto shotgun. The canister shot punched dozens of ragged holes into the alien's face, smashing it into a gorey pulp.

The Spartan then sprinted across the balcony and slammed his knife

home into the base of another Brute's skull, cleanly severing the central nervous system from the brain. The massive alien was already dead by the time it crashed onto the floor.

A Chieftain roared in rage and charged the Spartan with his Gravity Hammer held high. Fred sidestepped and leapt out of the way. The hammerhead missed him, but before it had touched the ground, the Spartan had aimed a perfectly timed kick and knocked the weapon aside.

He barely caught the look of surprise on the Chieftains face before he levelled his shotgun and fired at point blank. The Brute landed with a dull thud, smoke curling up from whatever was left of its head.

In the span of a few short seconds, Fred had wiped out an entire squad of Brutes in melee combat. He shook his blade clean of blood and brain matter before putting it back into its sheathe.

Kelly quickly moved to administer medical aid to the wounded, but John could tell that her body language said that the chances of these men and women surviving were very slim.

Already, Linda found a suitable sniping position and began to go to work and provide cover for her team.

"_Chief you've gotâ€¦_" whatever Cortana was going to say, John didn't hear it. None of the Spartans did.

But looking up towards _Campton_ did he realise why. A massive fireball billowed along the bottom hull. One of the accompanying _Charon_-class frigates was split in half; its shields barely withstood the hit. The reactor ruptured and detonated, sending a powerful shockwave across the entire CBD.

"Take cover!" a Sergeant cried.

The smoke was caught up in the shockwave; it was as if a nuke had gone off. Dust was kicked up into the air, and windows were shattered. Some of the buildings beneath that frigate had collapsed. Everything soon crawled into slow motion as John panned his eyes across the city.

As the explosion expanded, the remains of the ship fell to Earth. He braced for the shockwave. It felt like a brick wall had slammed into him. Everyone and anything around him that wasn't secure was simply tossed into the air like ragdolls.

When John came to, he had barely registered that Kelly had thrown herself over him seconds before a blue light washed over them. He felt himself being thrown across the balcony. The railings snapped under their combined weight, and soon the feeling of vertigo filled them.

He tried to stabilise himself, tried to stave off the rising sensation in his stomach but the alarms were blaring, nothing was responding. He could see Kelly's form above him, and the firestorm that enveloped the top floor. Plasma artillery arced overhead and slammed into the building. Glass and debris rained down all around him.

But Mount Sam Enterprises Tower began to topple. Sections began to crumble apart and fall off, like sledgehammer smashing through a block of ice. It was coming down straight on top of him. There was nothing he could do, but watch his own reflection in the glass and wait for the inevitable impact.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**HADRIEL **_**â€" **_**INFINITY-CLASS **_**CRUISER, IN ORBIT OF EARTH****

"Sir, enemy reinforcements have dropped out of slipspace," a Lieutenant said.

"Admiral, with those odds, we won't be able to hold," Aneira said.

Hood swore inwardly as he leaned on the tactical map.

Forgive me, he begged silently. A forlorn expression crossed his face as he was forced to make the toughest decision in the known history of humanity.

"Relay the order," he breathed. "Initiate the Hammer-Down Protocolâ€" god help us all."

With the order relayed to the rest of UNSC Command and UEG Hierarchy, it would only be a matter of minutes before the NOVA was launch.

****XXxxXX****

****MOUNT SAM ENTERPRISES TOWER, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, EARTH****

John blinked several times and found dots swirling in his vision. The alarms continued to drone. He tasted blood and his heart was beating so fast that it threatened to break his own ribcage. He felt blood pool down his face as he fought to regain consciousness.

Slowly, he placed his hands on the ground, and pushed himself up. Looking down, he saw a number of flattened pieces of metal which would've surely punctured through his under-suit. It was times like these he was happy that the current iteration of the MJOLNIR Armour had articulated plates. It saved his joints from being impaled on rubble.

John slowly brought himself off from the ground, his SCAR was a mangled mess but at least his pistol was still working. He coughed, and saw droplets of blood splash on his visor.

Internal bleeding, he thought.

"Report in!" he barked.

"John," a soft voice called out, it was Kelly.

The Spartan turned around and found his friend slumped against a massive chunk of rubble. Every muscle screamed out in protest from his movement, his body wanted to shut down, but his mind wouldn't let

it.

"Where are the others?" she asked, wincing in pain.

"They're dead." His voice softened, "they're dead."

Fred and Linda were gone, just like that. No last stand, just gone. Their armour was offline, and when that happened, the user was dead.

"Your helmet's shattered," she whispered. "Take mine; I'm not going to make it."

Her back had been burned to the extent that she couldn't move without aid. Her armour was in no better condition either, but at least her helmet was in better shape than John's.

"No, you're going to make it," John said, unwillingly to leave her behind like they did with Sam.

"No I'm not."

They eased their helmets off and handed them to each other. John's blue eyes gazed into Kelly's tired brown.

"Go, I'll cover you."

The howls of Phantoms and the roars of the Covenant grew louder.

Kelly looked back at John and raised her hand to form the Spartan smile across his face. He felt a pang of sadness ripple through his heart as a tear slid down her cheek. Her arm wrapped around his neck as she drew him in for a quick hug.

"_Dammit John, are you there!?"_

"I'm here," the Spartan said.

The signal began to clear up.

"_You've got fourteen minutes,"_ the AI stressed. "_Fourteen. Minutes. To get the hell out of there! Hammer-Down has been initiated. I'm uploading a NavPoint on your map. It'll lead you to a bunker designed for this."_

She didn't sound too hopeful on that last part, but there wasn't much of a choice. Nothing had survived a NOVA intact.

"_I've run some calculations, when the NOVA goes off, the hill or mountain or whatever the fuck it is â€" it will absorb most of the shockwave, and cave in over the entranceâ€" just get there okay?"_

"I will," he said, though something inside him told him not to go.

"_And John,"_ it was Halsey, "_survive."_

The link was cut by static as _Campton_ entered slipspace, the brief

blackout period that all ships went through when a portal was opened.

"Go, John," Kelly pleaded.

She reached just under her neck sleeve and pulled out her tags, with a rabbit engraved onto one of them, and placed them into his palm.

"Run."

John breathed in; he'd rather stay here with her. There was nothing left.

"Please! For me."

Slowly, he nodded and pulled himself up.

"I'll miss you," he said.

Kelly gave a sad smile. "Good luck, and take care."

He turned away from her and slid on her helmet, unable to say goodbye. He turned away from her, everything feeling surreal. He clambered out of the rubble and clawed his way to the surface. He heard the sound of her pistol go off, and the roars of the Brutes.

He sprinted down the road, his muscles screaming out in defiance. The nanites worked overtime to heal the damage. He felt the burn, he felt the strain; his body was shutting down. But he wouldn't let it. Whatever stims was left in the armour was all injected into his body.

He ran as fast as the armour would allow him, with one pistol in his hand, he fired on anything that moved. In his left, he held the Arbiter's personal gift for him, an energy blade with hydrogen fuel cells. Wispy blue air trailed in the wake of the crackling weapon.

He let the blade trail behind him, cutting through the ground and the occasional Covenant soldier. He heard enemy fire snap at his heels, but he didn't care. He sprinted across the boulevards, smashed his way through the buildings and cut down anything that stood in his path.

He knew he should've stayed with her, but something was beckoning him to go. He regretted following that voice. He should've stayed behind with her.

Looking at his HUD, he knew he didn't have much left to go. Just a few hundred more metres. He kept on running, his boots digging into the ground beneath him. The amount of force he had to exert to reach breakneck speeds was something more than the pavement could handle.

He ran up the hill, and finally reached the inconspicuous entrance wedged between a shopping mall and warehouse. The doors immediately opened as soon as it registered the tag. Only a few minutes left. John quickly ran to the elevators, entered it and punched in the

keys.

He felt the platform shift and descend into the depths of the facility. Gravity manipulators kicked in, allowing the lift to shoot down into the depths without putting its occupants into free-fall. The elevator came to a halt on the bottom floor. As John stepped out, the counter reached zero. He knew that it would only be another minute or so until the shockwave from the NOVA arrived. He simply leaned against the white washed walls and waited for the impact.

The ground began to shake, and soon it picked up in tempo. Chairs began to roll around the secretary desk but everything else held into place. The bunker began to shift, matching the earthquake and annulling the frequency. But parts of the facility soon gave into stress as part of the roof came in like jagged teeth, dumping piles of Earth onto the tile.

RnD had based the facility on Forerunner technology; hopefully it would be able to survive. John waited out the storm, and soon, all was quiet. The light was still on, and the base's supply still full. He walked past the foyer and into the main office area. All of the desks had been cleared out, but the armoury still had a few things in it, and the mess hall was still stocked.

The Spartan analysed the area, it didn't follow traditional designs of UNSC Bunkers which were a labyrinth of security checkpoints, bulwarks and emergency bulkheads. Instead it was more or less a foyer which stood between the elevator doors and the main office area. On the left wing were the medical centre, armoury and cryobay, and on the right wing were the living quarters and cafeteria. Then again, the entire facility was experimental.

He walked over to the armoury first where he pulled off his armour and stacked them in a neat pile. Then he shed off the black-grey exo-suit weaved with the armour-dock points. With enough time, the nanites in the exoskeleton would bring the MJOLNIR back to full functionality. After taking a quick look at the weapons rack, John returned back into the main area, and looked at the readouts on the holoprojectors.

All the sensors had been scrambled, but base integrity remained at 100%. John was impressed, he had heard of the NOVA's destructive capabilities, but maybe the weapon was detonated at a distance away from the planet.

The Spartan entered the medbay, where he examined his wounds. A quick medical salve was all that was needed to heal the cut on his temple, and some medication to dull the pain of internal bruising. He walked over to a mirror and examined himself. He wore the black Mark VII under-suit, with ultralight armour, military pants and boots. The suit's chrome hardpoints glinted under the light, but everything seemed to be in good shape.

Looking at his face, John could pick out the very faint scars from combat and the augmentation procedures. They had long healed over and become a part of him. His rugged features were slim and had lost all the suppleness and glow of youth. But still, his skin was smooth, his hair still a mix between brown and auburn and his eyes a deep blue that seemed to glow in the dark.

He ran his hand over the curving scar over his right eye, before gazing down at Kelly's tags. For safe keeping, he looped them around his neck and went into the mess hall to get something to eat. He could feel the post-trauma starting to settle in. He quickly grabbed an MRE Stew from the fridge and threw it into the microwave, letting it heat up before taking out the hot contents.

John walked into the private lounge, equipped with surround sound entertainment. He set down the bowl of stew and juice box onto the coffee table, and turned on the TV. He selected an orchestral concert and let it play in the background as he ate. Eventually, his eyes became glued to the screen as he mechanically downed his food.

Kelly's gone, his mind wandered. _She's goneâ€| dead! I left her behind. I could've stayed with her._

He pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to push those thoughts away. He turned off the lights, save for the glass lamp on the mahogany stand. John used the controls to change to a movie.

Lord of the Rings_â€| she always liked _Lord of the Rings, he remembered.

The Chief took in a deep breath, and switched over to documentaries. He skipped the ones about war, and eventually came upon TV Shows where he found one about cars. It would have to do. He needed a distraction.

But eventually fatigue settled in, it was time to sleep and give his body a rest. The room adjacent to the lounge was a bedroom, complete with an en suite. Despite being utilitarian in design, it was remarkably beautiful with its match of white and grey.

John peeled off his "smart-cloth" undersuit, boots and pants, and tossed them over the dresser. Left in his undershirt and shorts, he walked across the white carpet and found a small measure of comfort in it. Entering the bathroom, he entered his routine and let himself enjoy the five minute hot shower before cleaning his teeth and preparing for bed.

He dried his hair with a soft towel and folding it aside when he was done. He then set his pistol on the nightstand, and eased himself onto the soft mattress while pulling the warm duvets over him. A small part of him wanted to go into cryo sleep, but he needed to let everything sink in before going into the ice. He knew from experience that waking up from cryosleep after having been in a battle prior to go under, was a bad idea. He wanted to be focused and at peace when he woke up.

Lying on his side, John drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

â€|

Weeks passed, and he continued on with his numbed cycle; sleep, eat, train and learn. There was nothing else he could do. There was nothing left on the surface, and there was no way he could get out either. John walked along the corridors of the facility, and entered the armoury.

The robotic stations and the nanites had repaired the armour to full working order. He pulled the exo-suit back on and one by one, he attached each piece onto his suit's hardpoints until the MJOLNIR was whole again.

Systems operationalâ€¦ 100%

He gathered what remaining weapons there were, a handful of pistols, an M7SC SMG and a few DEW FR SCAR Assault Rifles with a SOPMOD kit and an M7 _Spartan Laser_. He held the weapons to his magnetic plates and got a full readout of operational status. The SCAR resembled the Asymmetric Recoilless Carbine, with a rounder, sleeker and streamlined look.

Satisfied that none of the weapons would blow up in his hands, the Spartan walked down the corridor, across a catwalk and into the cryochambers. He set the base to lock down, if any sensors were tripped, he would know immediately. But a frown settled across his features when he discovered that the sensors in the elevator shaft had been overloaded. That could cost him dearly.

He settled into one of the cryotubes and let the form-fitting gel layer mould itself to the armour's articulated contours, while he set the 'wake-up' parameters. If power was going to cut out or any of the sensors were tripped, the tube would thaw him out immediately.

The MJOLNIR's ports opened, allowing the cool air to reach his lungs. After blinking a few times, John's world faded to darkness.

****XXxxXX****

"_**To: FADM Lord Terrence Hood
>From: LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes_

I've done the preliminary calculations and evaluations as you asked. Unlike film makers and the dreams concept artists, mech warriors are not the next stage of warfare. They are not the tide turner of war. These heavy machines with a heavy amount of firepower are expensive to make and maintain when compared to regular equipment. They are also very vulnerable. A well placed sniper shot will be able to put the mech out of commission.

Pound for pound of resources, a group of well-trained and well-equipped soldiers will be able to take down a mech. I've told the board time and time again, mech warriors is the worst way to endanger our own people's lives and waste resources which would be better spent protecting them.

UNSC Combat Doctrine aims to have soldiers engage the enemy at long ranges, and avoid melee combat unless absolutely necessary. Our Doctrine aims to use stealth and surgical precision to eliminate key targets before moving in with shock and awe, whilst keeping collateral damage to a minimum.

I can see how mech warriors can become useful in shock and awe, BUT they are a huge target. Sure there are applications where mech warriors would be extremely valuable, but those scenarios are as frequent as blue moons. If we are considering Flood Contingency Operations then we can see mechs being far more useful.

However, in every combat scenario against a well-trained and well-equipped force, we see the mechs being outdone by specialist soldiers. Hollywood may make these machines look like gods of the fields, but a machine of this size is an easy target for snipers of heavy-weapons. Titanium-Aiglos3C Armour can only hold out against so much.

_These machines are __not__ worth it for frontline applications. Any walker in general is a waste of resources. I know I have been an advocate for cutting edge technology, but this is the wrong way to go. I am well aware of the dominance of the Covenant Scarab, but that was because of their armour plating._

In urban pacification campaigns, mech warriors would be best useful for bomb clearance and as immediate response. Other than that, the large sizes of these mechs leave them vulnerable to long range attacks. There are also the issues of concealment and manoeuvrability.

We've seen that when our cities fall, the walker's large size become a hindrance.

I propose that we issue the Ancile Industries' GALANTINE Powered Exoskeleton. The suit has been tested by ONI Counter-Intelligence Operatives, feedback received are positive (refer to Report-12.23.2565). Personnel from all branches praise the suit's modularity, capability and size. The suit is made out of a nano-carbon tubes smart cloth. Additional sensors help initiate electrical impulse to harden the surface in order to protect the user from blunt trauma and ballistics.

_One could argue that mechs would be best suited for heavy frontal engagements in urban environments. And while that is true, IFVs and MAVs perform at a much higher level."

>_**-Extract from an email sent by (UNSC Army/ONI) LTCOL Doctor Essington Dominic Keyes, to (UNSC Navy) Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood**_

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**Sam's Notes: That moment between John and Kelly was something I debated with myself and Andrithir. But seeing that the two were childhood friends, it seemed appropriate.**

**So please leave a review and tell us what you think.**

**Cheers,**

**Sam**

**P.S: Hammer-Down included NOVAS being detonated at a distance from Earthâ€| NOT ON Earth. Secondly, Fission Weapon Stockpiles were inadvertently detonated.**

2. Reclamation (Rewrite)

**Hey Everyone,**

**Sam and Andirithir again, here's the next rewrite.**

REWRITE COMMENCED: 15/06/2013

REWRITE POSTED ON: 14/07/2013

(Chapters 1&2 were written simultaneously)

â€|

A/N: We're going on the basis that the Phalanx was never nerfed and it still retained its laser sight.

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"_She might not be first choice for wetworks but she gets the job done. But she is definitely first choice if you a beacon of hope and a guardian angel."

>_**-(Formerly) Captain David Anderson (Alliance Navy and N7), talking to Admiral Steve Hackett **_**(Alliance Navy)**

XXxxXX

ABOARD **_NORMANDY SR-2**_

The woman sitting in the Captain's quarters had come a very long way to get to where she was today. Commander Jane Alice Shepard looked at her impressive military record that scrolled out on tablet before her. But it wasn't something she was proud of. Every achievement and medal she had earned was all marred by the blood of a friend. Having been raised on a ship with her parents, Jane had attended the best education the Alliance military could offer. At a young age, she had shown to be very adaptable and a capable leader no matter where she went. People described her as an easily approachable person; it allowed her to build friendships quickly. Yet for all that, she had seen too many friends die, and that was before being taken under the wing of the first N7 graduate, Captain (now Councillor) Anderson.

When Shepard had graduated from the Alliance Military Academy with a Suma Cum Laude, she had been overwhelmed with joy. But that was before her first taste of combat. A week after graduation, she was deployed to the frontier with a Command of green Alliance Marines. By god she was unprepared for that fateful day.

Her people were attacked by a massive Thresher Maw. The behemoth ripped through her men like they weren't even there. Its acidic glands spewed out caustic liquids which burned like white phosphorus. She remembered fighting through the pain while issuing orders to her woefully underprepared platoon. In the end, they managed to kill the bloody thing with the help of an armoured convoy. But by then it was too late, Shepard was the only one in her unit left.

Though just when she thought she could lie down and close her eyes, the colony was attacked again. This time it was by batarian pirates. Later she would learn that they weren't pirates, but a Hegemony Splinter Faction hellbent on killing as many humans as possible. Jane had spent the following 18 hours on nothing but stim-pack shots,

holding back the batarian force with an assault rifle and her biotic prowess. The batarian bastards had thought it was a brilliant idea to throw a Thresher Maw egg onto the planet, wait for it to hatch and then come in and mop up.

By the time an N7 Squad had arrived, Jane was on the verge of breaking down. The punishment her body had endured from being shot, burned, biotic fatigue and brawling with batarians was almost too much. She spent the next month healing her tattered pale flesh. After that, she accepted a commendation for the N7 Program.

She had once remembered a story or a legend her grandfather told her. He spoke of humanity expanding far out into the stars without Mass Effect technology, a long time ago. She had read theories on humanity's history and why there was such an evolutionary gap. Nothing was concrete, except for the fact that no one could accurately trace the origins of the English language.

But with this theory of humanity being a powerful spacefaring race before a cataclysmic event, cult groups had sprung up all over human-held space. Fundies, they were called " short for fundamentalists. They had been the ones to constantly having rallies to stop humanity from joining the galactic community, they wanted humanity to stand independent and await for the day that their ancestors would return and uplift them.

She had met a few of them on her way to Rio. They tried to recruit her, but she declined. As bad as her experiences was with the batarians, she couldn't bring herself to be vindictive of extra-terrestrial species as a whole. The first thing the instructors had told her at Rio was the very same thing her mother kept telling her. Racism never did anyone anything good. A path of hatred and bigotry is never forgiving and just. Jane had taken that lesson to heart. It was because of that she had the privilege to be sent abroad and train with other species. She graduated with Honours after returning from a Military Specialist Asari Biotic School on Thessia.

Then came the fateful day when she became Anderson's XO. That changed everything. Since that day, she kept a reserved opinion about politics, only stepping in when it was necessary. Becoming a "military" super-cop had changed her world, changed her outlook. She had witnessed a Prothean message she barely understood, and watched the Spectre's best and brightest turn against the whole galaxy. She was made a Spectre to hunt down Saren. There was no training; it was just a damn promotion. Rookie Spectre sent to kill Top Dog, without any support" what a _fucking_ joke.

Jane remembered her shock, the sheer stupidity and audacity of it all. She knew she was in over her head. But the weight of humanity on her shoulder and the heat of the moment spurred her on. When she took command, she realised there were worse things than having to hold a dying friend. Kaidan's calm voice never left her when he accepted his fate without question. He died on Virmire, guarding the nuke to cover her escape. Then she learned the existence of Reapers, massive sentient starships with the sole purpose of wiping out sentient life.

The Council didn't want to believe her. _Sovereign_ had caused so much damaged to the Citadel and its defence fleet that it was

horrifying to even think that there was more than one Reaper.

Shepard's brooding turned her attention to the day she died, the day when _Normandy SR-1_ was shot to _hell_ in space by Collectors, an enigmatic race appearing to make strange requests for genetic subjects in return for their tech. Jane would've been happy to remain dead had she known the scope of what she was getting into. But Cerberus â€" the worst of the Fundies â€" brought her back.

Their leader, The Illusive Man spent billions of resources and credits to revive her, and give her a better body. He sent her on a mission to investigate what was happening to disappearing human colonies in the Terminus Systems. She had one hell of an eye-opening experience witnessing the underworld of the galaxy.

She leaned back into her chair and downed a glass of Serrice Ice Brandy. She wasn't much of a drinker, but she had a reputation for being able to hold more liquor than her body mass. It was mainly due to the unfair advantage that biotics and biotic amps gave her. She needed to dull the pain of being given (in the words of Joker) a tongue lashing face rip by Ashley Williams back on Horizon.

Feeling the need to take a shower, Jane tossed the tacpad onto the coffee table and walked towards the bathroom. Unlike most of the crew, she preferred not to wear a Cerberus uniform. Instead she wore her armour's black and red undersuit with light pads for protection and mobility. She wasn't insane enough to wear heels all day like Miranda did. And although Jane wore a form fitting suit, she at least wore cargo pants and boots over the top, and it wasn't a catsuit where the finer contours of a woman's body could be seen.

Shepard was proud of her own figure, and she understood where Miranda was coming from, using her appearance to have an advantage. But there was a line. Wearing a catsuit into a firefight is never the smartest of choices. And at least Shepard's suit was thick for added protection, and she wore a shirt underneath too. She doubted Miranda wore anything under hers but lacy underwear.

Not my style, Jane pondered as she pulled off her clothes and chucked them over the dressing rack. She looked in the full length mirror and could see the thin lines from the surgery. From what Chakwas had said, the scars will fade quickly as the skin graft was implanted successfully. In time, her skin will return to its smooth creamy colour, thanks to the surgery.

No more scars.

Standing under the faucet and turning the tap on. Shepard let the hot water cascade down her brunette hair and roll over her body. Hot showers were a nice luxury on the _Normandy_ that she could enjoy indefinitely.

Satisfied that she was clean, she switched off the tap and dried herself off with a fluffy white towel. Grabbing a fresh pair of under clothing, Jane dumped the used ones into the laundry chute. Finally dressed, Jane sat down at her desk and picked a book out of the archives, and read a paper written by Doctor Conrad Verner speculating about the theories of the origin of man. In hypothetical terms he suggested that humanity's ancestors had nuked themselves for

reason unknown " probably due to an intergalactic war, but the radiation levels surrounding Uranium Deposits and geographical layouts certainly pointed towards the notion. The hypothesis was very convincing, but there was not enough evidence to support it.

Doctor Verner had garnered critical acclaim on his hypothesis; he just said it was something he did in his spare time. Amazing piece of work in Jane's opinion, his book literally shot every other Fundamentalist and Conspiracy theories out of the water. And his speculation wasn't too farfetched either. Everything was well within reason. Such as the speculation to why Earth's geographical formation unnatural and disturbed layout. He also stated that English would've been the dominant language, for uncovered copies The King's English and various other books written in different dialects served to confirm that notion.

To this day, scholars argued whether it should be "ise" or "ize", "colour" or "color", "mum" or "mom". So far, those backing The King's English were in the lead despite being heavily outnumbered. Nonetheless, the variations of English just became widely accepted and it all came down to accents in the end.

Having been taught by a teacher from Britain and parents from North America, Shepard's accent was something of a liar bird. She could mimic just about every English accent in existence, but her "native" accent was very neutral near accentless English, almost devoid of any extenuations of the vowels. If anyone listened carefully, there was a hint of a West Londoner and Brooklyn accent in her pronunciation.

Closing the article, Shepard looked at her reflection in the display cabinet. People said that she was a beautiful woman with her oval-heart shaped face, warm brown eyes, full lips, high cheekbone and high forehead face. But she found that hard to believe when she saw dull brown eyes staring right back at her. Tying her hair into a ponytail, she decided to close her eyes for a bit. But then her message alarm chimed.

"_Commander,"_ it was Joker over the ship's intercom, "_Admiral Hackett wishes to speak to you."_

"Patch him through to me," Shepard ordered.

"_Aye, aye, ma'am."_

Shepard stood up from her seat and brushed a speck of dust on her suit. Her slender unglove fingers danced across the panels as she entered her ID Challenge Response.

Her display cabinet dimmed as a projector displayed Hackett's image onto the glass screen.

"Admiral," Jane saluted.

"_Commander, we have a situation. I need you back on Earth for a briefing. I'm aware of your ties to Cerberus so please leave your ship at a suitable location and use other means to get to the briefing."_

"Understood, sir."

"_Shepard, this is strictly off radar. Bring no one with you, except those you 'trust'. I want this contained."_

"I'm on it, sir."

"_Good, Hackett out."_

The link was immediately terminated soon after, leaving Shepard to ponder who to take with her. Hackett's concerns were well conveyed as whatever he was going to tell her, he didn't want any leaks. Garrus was definitely suitable to accompany her, but a turian on Earth might cause a bit of tension. So he was out of the question. Miranda and Jacob were a definite no-go, because of their affiliations to Cerberus. Mordin was a possibility, but he had ties to STG so that might be another issue. In the end, Shepard decided to have Kasumi and Jack. They weren't in the information business, and they were loyal to her or at least loyal to humanity anyway.

"Joker," she said into the intercom, "plot a course for the Citadel."

"_Aye, aye ma'am."_

She felt the _Normandy_ shift beneath her as Joker steered the sleek ship towards the nearest Mass Relay. Knowing that it would be at least another twelve hours until she reached the galactic capital, Jane turned on the extranet to watch the news. As she lay her back against the pillows on the bed, she grew bored of listening to the same news over and over and over again. Using her Omni-tool, Shepard switched the channel to comedy. But the jokes on the show were bland; it seemed no one had good material these days. Everyone was too afraid of being political correct. The risquÃ© shows weren't on at the time, so she let logic dictate.

Kicking off the shoes and pulling off her socks, Jane made her more comfortable for a power nap. She left the music on however; she loved listening to the soothing upbeat melodies that Joker had compiled for her. He had good taste in music, but just to stay on the safe side, she had EDI check that there wasn't any _explicit _material. Jane wasn't keen on getting an earful of some asari being pounded, while asleep. Thankfully, her helmsman had been sincere and said that the playlist helped him sleep at night.

A few hours later, Shepard's internal clock woke her up. She swung her legs off the bed and pulled on her socks and boots before leaving her quarters. She had a small smile on her lips as she had a dreamless sleep, and a dreamless light sleep was the best form of night sleep she was ever going to have.

She walked over to her closet and pulled out a set of casual clothes. She replaced her black cargo pants with a pair of form fitting grey smart casual pants, black knee high leather designer boots, a white blouse and a black jacket which complimented her dark hair. Though she was going for the civilian look, it didn't mean she wasn't armed. Her Omni-tool had been fitted with military grade specs allowing her to create hardlight objects for offense and defence. On her belt, she had the powerful Phalanx pistol with a suppressor. Alongside her offensive arsenal, she had her kinetic barriers and cloak generator,

just in case.

As she descended down the elevator, she wondered what Hackett wanted to tell her. Obviously it was something big because the level of secrecy involved, but how big was it?

The doors hissed open and there was Kelly Chambers working diligently at her post. She sent Shepard a smile when she saw that her Commanding Officer had rested up well without any issues. She'd be sure to forward the information to Chakwas.

"Going somewhere, Commander?" Kelly asked in her cheery voice.

"Buying some supplies," Shepard said, "you're all good for shore leave until I get back."

A couple of crew members perked up at the idea of being able to spend some of their credits at the entertainment venues.

"Ma'am?"

"I might be awhile, so might as well let you guys blow off some steam," Jane explained.

"Thank you, ma'am," the crew cheered.

Shepard felt the dull shifts as Joker piloted the Normandy to the docking stations. Green lights pulsed at the airlocks, giving the all clear.

"Joker, you're good for shore leave until I get back," Shepard yelled into the cockpit.

"Jeez, you're going to be gone that long?" Joker pouted.

"Knock it off," Jane sighed.

Moreau laughed. "You still love us all. Don't worry; Miranda will make sure that I don't get into any trouble."

Shepard rolled her eyes. She knew that when she'd get back, Miranda would be tearing Jeff a new one, there was absolutely no point in trying to reprimand him. In any case, she'll probably get Zaeed and Jacob to tag along with the pilot, hopeful one of them was the sensible one and could at least minimise the damages.

Stepping out onto the main landing of the Citadel docks, Shepard gave her entire crew the quick rundown on what was happening, and everyone was free to do what they wanted to do "within reason and law of course. She then roped in Jack and Kasumi.

"Hackett needs me on Earth, so tag, you're it," Shepard said to the two.

"Last I checked, there weren't any warrants on me, so I think I'm good," Goto chirped.

Shepard shot Kasumi a look.

"I know for certain that I'll get past Immigration and Customs," the Master Thief reassured.

"I'd rather not know how."

"Don't worry about me. Worry about her," Kasumi gestured towards Jack.

"Screw you," the Biotic muttered.

"I'll wave Spectre status."

"Counter-productive to the whole 'incognito' business."

"Kasumi, just shut up," Jack sighed.

Goto sniggered.

"Jack, wear these," Jane said, tossing the powerful biotic a bag filled with a black wig, blue cargo pants for women, white top and a brown leather jacket with matching shoes.

"I'm not wearing these, Shepard."

"What?" she shrugged, sending the younger biotic, a look. "It's not you? That's the whole point, Jack. That's why I'm wearing makeup, now get changed."

A few minutes later, Jack returned from the change rooms.

"This is messed."

"You look great," Kasumi sniggered, "you should wear that stuff more often. I'm sure Shepard will be happy to help you with shopping. I'll come with."

Shepard led her small entourage through the dockyard until finally reaching the Commercial Section. She used her credits to buy a couple of tickets for a ship headed to Earth. Considering that she had Cerberus's financial support at her finger tipsâ€¦ _what's an extra few thousand credits when compared to the two billion?_ She reasoned.

The tickets she bought were premium, which gave them access to the bar â€" free of charge â€" and comfortable seats. Though a small voice inside of Shepard said that Jack would be cleaning out the entire stock of alcohol, the Commander made a mental note to add some donations later. On second thought, maybe it was best to keep Jack on some kind of leash.

"You spoil us, Shep," Kasumi cooed.

Boarding the ship, Jane looked around the cabin wearily. She had already made a few enemies after shooting up mercs and pirates across the galaxy.

****XXxxxXX****

****SYDNEY SPACE STATION â€" GEOSYNCHRONOUS ORBIT, EARTH, SOL SYSTEM****

Jane's eyelids parted as she gazed down on the planet below. Estimates in the previous century had predicted that Earth would be overwhelmed by global warming and that her ecosystem would reach a catastrophic point of no return. However, thanks to Mass Effect technology, scientists were able to bring the planet back to a safe equilibrium. Being the homeworld of humanity, the Alliance had spent billions in reclamation projects to beautify and enhance greenery. But it was night time in the Southern Hemisphere as the ship made its approach to the sea of stars dotted in a circular frame.

Despite how advanced Earth was, there were still regions that had still yet to join the modern age. Too much redtape and ethical issues should the Alliance move in all guns blazing. That was the problem with democracy in times of peace. People start to become lethargic or believe them to be disillusioned and then suddenly whatever the government or corporations did was soon perceived to be as the Illuminati at work. Or maybe it was and it was all just a big twisted conspiracy, but Shepard never really dealt with the issue fully. She just toyed with the idea every now and then.

The ship docked and the airlocks locked together. She led her team out of the craft and onto the chrome themed space station, filled with plant life and water features. Military stations were all utilitarian; there was nothing there to ease the eyes but a massive viewport over the planet. But here, no expense was spared on interior design. Jane could at least name a few of the sculptors who had their work here, and the style of the décor had a unique signature she had seen before on documentaries about extravagant hotels and casinos.

"This way, guys," Shepard beckoned.

Jane walked past a counter and flashed her Spectre status. No argument and no fuss was made as everyone crossed the checkpoint. The guards kept their mouths shut because of their down to Earth nature, and none of them wanted to lose their jobs. The film industry had a habit of overplaying security officers, either making them to spineless or overzealous.

"Have a nice day, ma'am," the Alliance customs officer said.

"You too."

With her team in tow, she made her way through the endless sea of holidaying families, travelling businessmen and contractors, to get to the shuttle-hire bay.

"Welcome to Sol hires, how can I help you?" the female clerk asked.

Shepard knew that for PR purposes, companies preferred to have a living, breathing person at the front desk. The young woman tending to her was probably aged around 22, and judging by the way how the clerk spoke and held herself, Jane guessed that the young woman was undergoing tertiary education.

"I'd like to hire out a shuttle for a day."

"Certainly."

The clerk went through a quick background check, where Shepard had to wave Spectre status once more.

"Oh, Commander Shepard, I didn't realiseâ€¦"

"I'd appreciate you keep this low-key."

"Of course, ma'am," the clerk's expression almost faltered. After all, how many days in a week did she get to meet anyone with Shepard's calibre? Answer, none. Shepard was in her own league entirely.

Picking up the keychip from the desk, Jane made her way to one of the shuttles. Sitting down in the co-pilot seat, Jane strapped herself in and entered in voice command.

"_Where would you like to go?"_

"Sydney, Australia. Brighton station," she answered, looking at the map.

"_Plotting course. Course set."_

The engines flared and the craft lifted itself out of its port before flying down the runway. Inertial dampers kicked in to stop everyone bouncing around. Re-entry inside a not-so-aerodynamic vessel is never a pleasant experience.

As the Kodiak shuttle slowly descended, the massive city skylines of Australia began to fill the viewport. Unlike military Kodiaks, the civilian variants were loaded with entertainment systems and composite-duraglass windows. Rarely did Shepard get to experience this kind of view, despite spending the vast majority of her life on ships.

Looking into the main hold, Shepard saw that Kasumi was reading a brochure on museum and that Jack was gazing over the planet with glazed and forlorn eyes. Shepard knew that look; it was the look of longing. With the Kodiak soaring over the entertainment district, Jack's expression softened even further as she placed a palm on the glass. Jane averted her gaze away and felt a pang of sadness for the young woman. She may have a tough tattoo exterior moulded by Cerberus's cruel biotic program, but she was still human.

"_Incoming transmission,"_ said the shuttle's speakers.

"_Attention, Kodiak number two-five-dash-alpha-one, you are entering restricted airspace, please identify or return to minimal safe distance."_

"Commander Shepard, here to meet Admiral Hackett."

There was a brief pause on the other end.

"_Code in, whiskey."_

"Rum and gin," Shepard countersigned.

"_Commander Shepard, you're cleared for landing."_

The link was terminated; Jane took over the flight controls and manually guided the Kodiak to its destination. She dipped the vessel over a hillside, passing over a land-expansion site before dropping down into a small harbour-like area.

Bloody ant farm, she thought.

Mantis attack gunships and Alliance shuttles were orbiting the site of incident, circling like birds of prey. With the enhanced vision Cerberus gave her, Jane was able to see the ranks of Marines forming a staggered defensive perimeter, allowing Mako Tanks to lock down ground approach vectors. Hammerhead tanks stood on standby, ready to pounce.

"Shit's going down here," Jack muttered.

"That's why we're here," Shepard said.

She had to admit that such activity had perked her curiosity. Prefab structures were already being erected as heavy earth moving equipment was deployed. In the centre of it all, was a heavily damaged shaft. Well the top part looked like it had bitten off, but the rest was just covered with dirt. Around it however were a number of large metal plates stacked atop one another.

The Kodiak touched down on a makeshift landing pad under the cover of floodlights. Turning off the engine, Shepard got out of her seat and disembarked. She felt the warm summer breeze wash across her face and tousle with her hair a bit. Slightly annoyed at her locks getting in the way, she tied them into a quick ponytail.

Already, there was Admiral Hackett waiting for her. Flanking both his sides were the 81st Commando Division Soldiers. They were the Alliance's answer to the demand of flexible elite light infantry. They wore their trademark emblem on their shoulder pads, a shield with a flaming battle-axe lying diagonally across. All the men were armed with the Next-Gen N7-Valkyrie Assault Rifle. The sleek black rifles were outfitted with the latest accessories available. However, a number of men were armed with the N7 Typhoon LMG instead. They would serve as the shields and suppressors of the unit.

"Commander Shepard, glad you could make it," Hackett greeted.

"Sir," Jane saluted.

She lowered her hand as the Admiral lead the group towards the centre of the dig site. A team of N7 Operatives patrolled the area in their standard issue gear. All of them gave Shepard a nod of acknowledge as she passed by. She too returned the gesture as a sign of good faith and camaraderie.

"What's the situation, sir?" the Spectre asked.

"Long story short, Shepard, an electric company detected a 'massive' power source in this area?"

"Massive?"

"Big enough to raise some concerns," Hackett shrugged. He pulled up a

display on his Omni-tool. "These power fluxes mimic a collapsing star."

The feed expanded outwards and showed a layered cross-section result of the harbour.

"Our analysts believe that we're standing on top of a cold-fusion reactor core."

"We don't have anything like that, do we?" Shepard tilted her head.

"No," Hackett shook lightly. "Nothing like this, deep scans show an installation, probably military â€" heavily damaged. As you can see here, these pipes run out into the ocean. But the recent land-expansion projects have blocked them off."

"That's meagreâ€" 'assuming its cold fusion' I mean."

"Well, it's all we had to go on with."

"What do you think this could be?"

"Have you read Doctor Verner's thesis?"

"_Man's missing past_?"

"That's the one. We think he's not far off from the truth."

"You meanâ€"|" Jane began to eye the centre of the dig site.

"Yes Commander, what's down there could've been built like our ancestors. We are standing three kilometres over our missing link."

"My god," she whispered to herself.

"Engineers have cleared away all the dirt and rocks, which have been examined to be a thousand years old," Hackett explained, leading the group towards the shaft.

The Admiral wasn't dressed in his usual dress suit, but in light-combat gear. Mud was smeared all over his pants, it looked like the man was more curious than he let on, and he was expecting trouble.

"We were expecting some kind of cave in or something, but the dirt had been held back by a bulkhead sealer." Scans didn't penetrate the hull."

Jane peered down the shaft, drones were moving back and forth to remove the dirt and rocks away. The shaft's cross-section was approximately 10x15 metres.

"How long until we go in?" she asked.

Hackett looked at a report from his Omni-tool. "Engineers say that there having a tough time trying to find out what's on the other side. The walls are lined with lead or a dense alloy that stonewalls our sensors."

Jane frowned, but at the same time was filled with a sense of awe and speculation. Here was possible proof of man's missing history. The key to the inextricable and unexplainable gap was here.

"Ask one of the Gunnery Chiefs to see if you can get an N7. Tell them to charge it to my account," the Admiral suggested, gesturing to one of the prefab shelters.

Shepard considered the option and decided to go through with it. She walked along the unearthed dirt and clambered over a few mounds to get to the building. Inside was the Alliance's next generation of weapons slated to supersede their current batch sometime in the following year.

"Nice," Kasumi whistled.

"Commander Shepard," a middle aged woman greeted. Her name tag said; Audrey Gould. She briefly panned her eyes across the Spectre's cadre, but gave them no second thought. Having a hero's image did come in handy at times.

This is new— Jane thought. Never in her lifetime had she encountered a female Gunnery Chief that old. She had weathered brown skin, watchful eyes and greying hair.

"I'm Granny."

Somewhat appropriate, the Spectre thought dryly. "Admiral Hackett said I could drop by and pick up some new guns."

Granny pursed her lip and looked at a weapons rack on the grey wall.

"The N-Seven Line. Well come on and have a look."

Jane found it slightly unnerving and scary how Granny could easily talk about weapons, like Chakwas could talk about surgery. The air of casualness and the maternal instinct in the air was unfamiliar and somewhat unwelcoming. But Shepard concluded that it was along the lines of an acquired taste. Marines passed by and gave their respects to Granny before moving on; even some of the officers stopped and gave her a salute.

"Phalanx pistol, I'm sure you're familiar of it," Granny said, gesturing to Shepard's hidden sidearm. "The Engineers at R-N-D decided to give it an upgrade. The N-Seven Eagle."

The Gunnery Chief produced a heavily modified version. It looked like a sleeker, matte-black M-5 Phalanx with an integral silencer.

"As great as the M-Eleven Suppressor is, it is one ugly weapon. I've decided to combine it with the Eagle, and here's the end product. I'll forward the design back to OHP and collect the royalties. This thing of beauty will help even out the odds."

Shepard picked up the sidearm and twirled it in her hands. It was lightweight and perfectly balanced, yet it also felt extremely powerful.

"What have you decided to call it?" the Commander asked. "Clearly not Seven-Eleven though."

Granny gave a short laugh. "Heavens no. Mark-One-One-Seven Hoplite."

Jane recalled her history classes; she remembered learning about Ancient Greece. There wasn't much on them, well, there wasn't much information than anything spanning beyond six-hundred years. Information beyond that point in time was rare. However, there was an anthology that offered insight into the Greek culture. Though damaged, the book painted an accurate image of Athenian culture, Greek Olympics and Grecian Warfare. Hoplites and their Phalanx formations had proven themselves to be extremely effective fighting formations. Hence the name of the pistols, but the anthology did refer to a city known as Sparta and its Spartan culture – specifically martial culture. Numerous referrals indicated that the Spartans were excellent warriors, being able to fend off vastly numerically larger forces. Though what was more disturbing was that there were references to Spartans in texts dated just over millennia ago. It meant that someone had "revived" the superb soldiers.

"I'll grab a crate," Shepard said to the Gunnery Chief.

"Should I bill them to Hackett or you?"

"Hackett," Shepard answered immediately. "He'll bill them to me later."

Granny then walked over to the next rack and showed the baseline N7 Valkyrie. Of course they had all been upgraded according to their serial number, it was just they were devoid of any accessories.

"I'm assuming you'll want these. Our friends in the Eighty-First love these rifles."

"Crate, and send Hackett the bill."

Granny showed them a few more weapons, but Jane settled for the Valkyrie, Hoplite and Valiant. She had debated whether to take the N7 Hurricane or not, but the recoil and low accuracy was not worth the fire rate, in comparison to the Kasa Locust. They were specialist weapons tailored to her needs or the needs of specific team members. Everyone else was more than comfortable with what they had. Shepard doubted that Garrus would ever abandon his Mantis or Viper Sniper Rifles, even if he tried. He had configured and calibrated them perfectly to suit his needs.

Shepard and her team spent the better part of the hour grabbing whatever military-grade hardware they could get their hands on to upgrade their weapons. Jane was pleased to find out that these SOPMOD kitted weapons had selective fire, allowing her to alternate between semi, two-round burst (her favourite), three-round burst and full-auto. These weapons were designed to have a specific purpose while retaining the Alliance's maxim of flexibility and modularity. She kitted out her Valkyrie with an extended/suppressor hybrid barrel, piercing mod, stabilising grip, optics and extended clip. In summary, as much of the SOPMOD kit as long as it did not impact heavily on manoeuvrability.

Satisfied that all weapons were in working order, Jane decided to don some light-combat armour, just in case. They weren't full body, they just protected the vitals. Elbow, knee and shoulder pads with an armoured vest.

Good enough.

Sliding the weapons into place, Shepard beckoned her team out of the armoury.

"Thanks Granny."

"Anytime."

Jane's Omni-tool pinged. She guessed that the Sappers had finally made some progress. As she got back into the dig site, the Engineers were already moving a lift into place. There was a lot of safety winch cable with them too.

"We're ready to go in," Hackett said.

"Are you going to come with us, sir?"

The Admiral shook his head. "Media birds are on us, I've got to go make up an excuse."

"Good luck, sir," Shepard said with a half-smile.

She led her team to the elevator where the Engineers had already attached their systems to the shaft.

"We're ready to go."

As the team boarded, some of the other Alliance soldiers sent Shepard and her team weary glances. They all believed in her, but sensationalist media had a tendency to blow things out of proportions. Already there were rumours of her working with Cerberus. But then again, the rumour didn't have much stock going for it to begin with and they had already been circulating for quite some time.

_Good thing I didn't bring the _Normandy, Shepard thought to herself, recalling the ship's orange-yellow, white and black livery.

****XXxxxXX****

****UNSC BUNKER****

Cool air flooded through his lungs, a slow tingling sensation rolled across his body as the first sparks coursed through his mind. His chest constricted and heaved, but he fought to keep the contents down. The glass hatch hissed open, white mist flowing onto the metal floor.

Quickly John pushed himself off the form-fitting gel bed, and collapsed to his knees. His skin and muscles felt like burning crystals, he'd been under too long. The nanites were working to heal his body, but it wasn't fast enough. He pulled off _Kelly's_ helmet and let it clatter to the deck. His chest heaved again, and this time

he coughed without restraint. He shook violently as he spat out a long greenish trail.

Bronchial sulfunctant always tasted horrible, the scientists never seem to get the flavour combination right. But then again, nothing tasted nice if it came back up the throat. He blinked a few times to clear out the spots in his vision. Every time his eyelids closed it was like a bittersweet sensation. A soothing, softening feeling mixed in with sharp pinpricks. He dragged in a deep breath, stabilising himself as memories rushed back. _Earth, Hammer-Down, escape, bunker, Kellyâ€¦_

Too long, he thought. He'd been in the tube for too long.

"_Reactor core is almost exhausted. Fuel source depleted."_ the Base's custodian computer said, in its disembodied female voice.

"

"Display results."

"Command confirmed."

A holo-screen materialised into existence in front of the Spartan. Sensor data was displayed in its raw form, until their windows fanned outwards to make room for an information display â€" an interpretation of all real-time data.

Someone had blocked off the water to the cold-fusion reactors. Of course the system hadn't detected that until it was too late. External sensors had been knocked out by Hammer-Down

Innies or survivors? The Chief wondered. He assumed the later; there was no mention of the UNSC, no sign of the UNSC. These people were in blue armour, save for the group in the middle who were wearing casual clothing.

Quickly, John's mind ran through a sequence of scenarios. The Spartan inside of him had nothing concrete to offer. He couldn't just shoot his way out. Because if he did, then the people up top would seal off the shaft. But the intelligence officer and tactician inside of him had a plan.

Play possum, and see where they take you.

The Spartan quickly doubled back into the armoury, tagged the weapons while grabbing a handful of everything and then sprinted over to the cafeteria where he purged the entire food source. He needed to make this look convincing. While the system purge was underway, John headed over to the laundry room and hauled the clothing into the main bunker area.

He threw the clothes, armour and weapon all around the area. The majority in the cafeteria and the main hall. Once that was done, he sprinted over to the garbage dump and smeared the waste onto the clothes. Too bad there weren't any skeletons lying around, but he'd have to improvise.

There were a few C12 packs in the armoury. Without much time to spare, he placed them in small amounts around the bunker. He was

careful not to knock out anything too important. Making a final check, John ran to the cafeteria area and created a barricade of sorts, not for his own protection of course.

They were going in with their own equipment. Good, that allowed him more time. John took in a deep breath, and detonated the explosives. Pockets of explosions ripped throughout the entire facility. The fire-extinguisher networks were severed. All data was purged and power cut.

C12 was a "clean" explosive. It's chemical compounds were designed for maximum shockwave effect. There was a near zero carbon emission from the plastique. Sections of the bunker collapsed, parts of the roof caved in. Now it was time to wait.

"_Unauthorised personnel are descending down the shaft. Elevator damaged."_

Another screen materialised to John's left. Sensors strips within the shaft painted a very clear image of the group's armaments and armour. In a defensive square, heavily armoured men stood guard with high-powered weapons.

Audio feed began to flood through the speakers.

"_What do you think we'll find here?" _a man asked in English.

"_Our past, our missing link," _a woman suggested.

****XXxxXX****

****DESCENDING TO SITE OF INTEREST****

The air was filled with tensions. It was almost impossible to move freely in it. The Commandos held the guns primed at the heavy doors, illuminated by their flashlights. The dull thumps they felt earlier didn't serve to calm their edgy nerves, but the analysts upstairs had assured them that it was probably the reactor core going offline.

"How the bloody hell are we going to get through that?" a Corporal muttered.

"We'll call in something," Jane said. "Everyone form up. We don't know what's behind these doors."

It took the better part of the hour to call in ample amounts of thermite tap and a blow torch down into the shaft. Once they had arrived, it was another long, tensed filled wait as the engineers worked to boil away the extremely stubborn metal alloy.

The process was slow and cautious, sparks were sent flying onto the platform, and molten metal pooled around the door until finally, a sizeable opening was made.

"Send a drone through there, I don't want any surprises," Shepard ordered.

An engineer complied, entered a few commands into his Omni-tool and

sent the orange orb inside. He scanned the area, and frowned.

"What is it?" Jane asked.

"Inside's been shot to shit ma'am."

Shepard ushered the Commandos inside. Like a well-oiled machine, they fanned out and secured the area. With their overlapping field of fire, they had the place secured.

"Clear up!"

"Clear down!"

Floodlights crossed paths as they swept back and forth the eerie darkness. Recovery Teams moved in from the elevators and began to set up sensor drones to light up the area, revealing the shattered scene that waited for them. Jane soon entered, her sensors leading the way. After passing the smell of ozone, her nostrils were assaulted by a horrid stench. She regretted not having a helmet on.

"Shit," Jack murmured.

"You are so buying me a new bottle of soap," Kasumi gasped.

"Going to Tuchanka is now officially off my bucket list," the Master Thief proclaimed.

"You went there with Mordin last week," Jack groaned.

"For holidays."

"Why the fuck would you want to go there for a holiday? Not a good place for a tanâ€¦ or anything," Jack turned.

"Belt up," Shepard reprimanded. "Fan out, and tell me if you find something."

This is itâ€¦ the missing link, Jane thought to herself.

She looked around the damaged interior. It looked like the aftermath of a hellish battle. What appeared to be human remains were strewn all over the place. It seemed rot had a chance to set in as well, judging by the charred piles of sludge that remained. Parts of the structure had collapsed as if someone had been dropping shells onto the base.

The Spectre walked over to a greyish white desktop, shattered and burned. It was the foyer's main desk. Gingerly, she knelt and picked up a piece of grey cloth, ragged and torn. All that was left where the letters _UNS_ and what she guessed was a _C_. Her hopes of finding the age old questions were evaporating quickly. No one was reporting anything solid other than damaged weapons, shattered armour and a lot of shit-smelling foulness.

Decaying remains looked _preserved_; they had to be after being in an enclosed environment for so long. But with a space this expansiveâ€¦ something just didn't add up.

She guessed from the charred interior design that this place had a

civilian involved with it, despite the strong amount of military presence it once had. Somehow, it served to ease her nerves that maybe her ancestors weren't oppressive tyrantsâ€¦ or at least openly oppressive. But that was just hunch. Then again, what kind of dictatorship would have aesthetically appealing environments?

Could be said dictator's bunker, she reasoned. _But I see "colourful" casual clothes._

Maybe it was a bit too early to jump to conclusions, but she would press on and look for something.

"_Hey Shep," _it was Kasumi, _"we've got nothing in the cryogenics bay, everything's destroyed."_

Shepard frowned. No survivors then.

"Copy that, keep searching."

"I'm getting a dark patch from the cafeteria," a Recon Commando said.

"What makes you think it's a cafeteria?" another asked.

"I see chairs, tables, booths and serving stations on my scanner. Ergo, cafeteria."

Jane followed the soldiers up an elevated platform and onto marble tiles marred by soot and grime. They headed down the corridor which had display cabinets within its walls, before reaching what was left of the eatery. Tables were overturned, chairs splayed hap-hazardly and a lot of human remains. Well, she assumed they were human remains; everything was too decomposed to identify.

"How long did you think they've been dead for?" a soldier asked.

"Hard to say, judging from the remains and the state of this place, at least a few hundred years. They're all dustâ€¦ but some of them are fresher, maybe a few months," a Corpsman answered. "No bonesâ€¦ take that as you will."

"I think we can rule out natural," Shepard said, kneeling down and examining a shattered helmet.

Despite its state, it didn't look particularly worn out. The people who died would've had been freshly supplied when they were killed.

"Hey! I got something!" an N7 Operative called out. She had her weapon in hand, ready to snap into position.

Shepard carefully approached her position by the barricade of partially melted tables. She could feel a chill run down her spine as she examined the damages. It looked like plasma or particle acceleration, but the explosive cavity of the damage suggested kinetic as well

The Spectre peered over the barricade and felt an icy hand grip her heart. It was huge. A figure, humanoid slumped by the wall, pocket

marked with burns and chips. She ran through some quick calculations and guess the thing would have to be at least seven feet tall at full height. Beside it lay a large weapon (in proportion to her), it was sleek and streamlined and looked downright _fearsome_. It appeared to be a front-loaded weapon, a design that had not seen service for at least a hundred years. Somehow, she doubted that the clip inserted into the slot in front of the trigger, contained bullets.

Gently, she lifted herself over the barricade and approached the figure cautiously. It could be a trap; she had many things that looked dead enough jump her. But it looked the greyish green behemoth was inert, as she shone her light over it, she noticed that the light coming back was _off_, more dull and dim than possible. It died with a very human like pose too. Back slumped against the wall, arms dapped over its splayed legs and head tilted to one side. Death for it would've been painfully slow.

Hmm, no dust, no blood, and no damagesâ€¦ pristine condition. Interesting.

Jane edged closer, crouching by the armoured being's side. She looked into his gold reflective visor and saw her own reflection. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she examined the armour more closely. It had articulate plates, like those used by medieval knights, but with today's technology it was extremely difficult to pull something like that off. There were parts exposed however, she looked at the separation between the shoulder pauldrons and neck plates and saw an undersuit. It looked thick and tough like Krogan hide. On the right breast plate were the inscribed _117._

She knew exactly what she was staring out, military hardware perfection, made by the ancestors. She brought up her omni-tool and performed a reading. Waving the device over, she read the preliminary results. The armour was an absolute black body. There was nothing active insideâ€¦ or she couldn't read anything inside because it was passively blocking her, just like the facility had.

More and more soldiers began to crowd around, assured that the base was inactive. She could tell by their body language that they were extremely excited and awed.

Despite how powerful the armour look, Jane performed her examination with infinite care. She guessed the occupant would've died of starvation. Or maybe there was no user and it was a next-gen mech? But then again, why would it _die_ like that. If it was a mech, it would've stood inert, not slumped against a wall.

"Place is safe, call the rest in," Shepard ordered.

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****ALLIANCE TESTING FACILITY, BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA, EARTH****

Due to the sensitive nature of the Base, Shepard was forced to leave her team on the landing pad above ground â€" as well as her armour and weapons, except for her Hoplite Pistol. She had followed Hackett through the maze of security checkpoints until finally reaching the lab wing which held all of the items found within the Bunker.

As she stepped onto the catwalks stretched over the modular labs, Jane panned her eyes to take in her environment. In the centre of the main room were Verner and the armour, to the far right was one of the weapons recovered and to the left high was an observation room.

Doctor Conrad Verner looked extremely sleep deprived yet insanely excited. She had met the man before, after her induction into the Spectres. He was slightly neurotic and comparable to Mordin Solus. The man was busy running diagnostics on the armour, furiously tapping away at the console.

She and Hackett walked onto the elevator which descended down to the main floor. Despite being dressed in civilian clothing and wearing make-up, Verner still recognised her whereas many others had not.

"Ah, Commander Shepard and Admiral Hackett, good to see you," the scientist smiled warmly. He adjusted his AR glasses before extended a warm hand.

Shepard returned the gesture as well as Hackett. A number of the junior scientists stopped for a moment and looked at Jane, trying to figure out if it was really her. Rumour has it that she had been killed, but was brought back to life. She smiled inwardly, satisfied that her ability to disguise herself was still up to scratch.

"What do you have for us, Doctor?" Hackett asked.

A smile spread across Conrad's face.

"Most of the weapons you found were destroyed, I tried to get a carbon sample for testing but whatever happened it was clean," he began. "However, we have one that is still workingâ€¦ and get this."

His voice grew more excited as he added additional enthusiastic hand gestures.

"Get thisâ€¦ it has Latin script. FR SCAR-H Mk Twenty-Seven Mod Zero imprinted on the side."

Verner lead them over to the weapon bench where the rifle was clamped securely down, rigged up to a firing mechanism and aimed down range. It was the same one she had found by the armour's side. Its profile was similar to the N7 Valkyrie, but instead of having two barrels, the FR SCAR-H Mk 27 Mod 0 had symmetrical trapezoids spaced apart, and within the small confines of the trapezoids was a large barrel. The apparatus mounted on the under-barrel was assumed to be the grenade-launcher. Directly behind the grenade-launcher's trigger was an angled-foregrip which was followed up by the pistol grip and trigger, and the magazine slot directly after. Additional attachments included a bipod for increased firing stability, and optics.

The weapon's general design and attachments flew in the face of what was generally expected of a more technologically advanced group. Filmmakers painted high-tech weapons to be uniformed and lacking in accessories. But here, the SCAR-H was outfitted with so much equipment that it would make a soldier drool.

"I've toyed around with the settings; so far we're looking at laser and particle accelerator hybrid... and some other unknown energy type which acts like a kinetic projectile. Here, I'll show you."

He pointed to the mechanical flip, currently pointed to a crossed out box, which Shepard guessed _safe_. Additional settings were two-burst, three-burst, semi and full-auto. Behind the firing settings was another additional set marked out as _L, L + HL, and _L + HL + I_.

"We'll go on L firstâ€¦ L for laser," Verner grinned â€" somewhat evilly. Now Shepard knew why her cousins were so afraid of their physics teacher.

The group retreated to a firing station, behind a protective barrier. A number of drones set up a mannequin wearing standard issue armour.

"Firing in three, two, one," Verner pressed the button.

Instinctively, Shepard expected to hear a loud whine and see a brilliant flash of light like the old sci-fi films, but instead, she heard nothing and saw nothing â€" just like her rationale mind said. The composite armour had a gaping smouldering hole inside, smoke curling up and molten dripping onto the deck. The camera's showed that a small clean hole had burned cleanly through the target.

"I'm guessing that this weapon was designed with the purpose of scoring killshots first time. Application is stealth," Conrad said with a very _morbid_ glee.

Jane couldn't help but arch an eyebrow at the pure effectiveness that this weapon would have in stealth applications. A weapon like this could definitely tilt the favour for whoever was using it.

"The laser is in infrared," Verner explained, "but it is honed extremely, directing all of its energy into the target without wasting it into the atmosphere. Even if you had infrared goggles, you'd still be hard pressed to see the beam."

Conrad entered a few commands into the console, cycling in a fresh target.

"The last mannequin I used mimicked human biology and it had Kinetic Barriers. The laser bypassed the barriers and cauterised the wound, very clean. Now, here's the Laser-plus-HL setting. I'd say HL stands for Hard Laser or Hard Light."

The scientist's grin grew so wide that it threatened to split his face. Shepard noticed a number of scientists adjusting the settings on the camera controls.

"Firing in three, two, one!"

A loud thunderclap echoed through the lab. A brief blue hue flashed over the mannequin as its barriers flashed but held firm, according to the display in front of Shepard. But like the mannequin before, a small "clean" hole appeared with smoke curling up from the molten openings.

"Now, we'll see it on ballistics gel."

The target cycled through, a clear coppery slab was placed in front of the weapon.

"Firing in three, two, one!"

Another loud thunderclap, but no light was emitted. Shepard looked at the gel; liquid was slowing pouring out of the much larger hole, with its insides torn ragged.

Verner brought up the slow-motion capture. Shepard watched with pure awe as the gel was melted away by an invisible force a split moment before an unseen fist punched through, sending ripples throughout the gel.

"As you can see here, the temporal cavity created by hard light can cause extremely grievous injuries on a target. As the cavity collapses in on itself again, internal damage is further amplified. The sound you hear is the sound of hard light breaking past the sound barrier."

Conrad used his pen to mark out keypoints in the playback. From Shepard's knowledge, nothing in Alliance's arsenal could replicate that kind of damage. Standard rounds did not cause a temporal cavity to the extent shown in the slow-motion capture, AP rounds would pass through and shredder rounds were nowhere near that effective. Hollow-point rounds (which were illegal for military usage) was close, but not close enough. Whatever the SCAR-H was designed for, it was definitely not for human targets, it was made for much bigger and heavier ones.

"Now, for the final setting," Conrad's grin grew even bigger if that was even possible. He flashed his immaculate teeth as he entered the settings onto his console.

"Firing in three, two, one!"

A loud whined pitch mixed with a roaring thunderclap and electrical discharged surged throughout the entire lab, accompanied by a brilliant beam of cobalt blue. The target's kinetic barriers overloaded and winked out, the armour and the bodice beneath had a sizeable chunk of the abdomen missing. The round hadn't hit centre mass, so it wasn't an instant kill, but the damage done would've killed the person soon after. From the wispy eldritch that faded into the air, Shepard could tell that it was the ionised air dissipating.

"Beautiful," Verner grinned.

"You could've shown us playbacks of earlier tests," Shepard added casually.

"This is more fun," he said with a bone chilling smile.

"Can we replicate this kind of technology?" Hackett asked.

"For the most part, we have something like these in our armoury. All are Protoean based, none are as this effective or compact. We're

still a long way away from creating something even close to this," Verner said with trepidation.

"Have you triedâ€¦"

"â€¦ pulling it apart?" Verner finished. "Yes, but it was hardware locked. The composite alloy the weapon is made out of is extremely tough to openâ€¦ when we got it open it self-destructed."

Conrad waved to a charred out husk on the bench opposite to the working SCAR-H.

"Now, there are a number of pistols and submachine guns you uncovered," the scientist pursed his lips. "They fire premade bulletsâ€¦"

Jane tilted her head and arched an eyebrow.

That's unexpected, she thought.

"We've put them through stress tests and whatnot; they are extremely rugged and durable."

Weapon readout appeared on the console screen, but Shepard noticed that there weren't any penetrating scans. But there were photos of it in its dismantled forms. The pistol was engraved with _FR68_, and looked like a very rugged, sleek yet skeletal firearm. In short, it looked extremely expensive but not for show as it would be worth every dime. Like the SCAR-H, the FR68 was just as heavily customised with an extended magazine, enhanced optical sights and a suppressor.

The SMG, was engraved with _M7SC_ _SMG_, and had a suppressor attached. However, it looked like it was in default form as there was no additional accessories save for the silencer. The foregrip was clearly premade and attached with the firearm.

Interesting, Shepard noted.

The next two weapons shown looked extremely similar to the SCAR-H. One was marked _as FR SCAR-L Mk 26 Mod 0_, it looked slimmer and shorter, about the size of an N7 Valkyrie. However Conrad had marked it as _defunct_. There were a number of horrendous scorch marks running along the entire length of the weapon which Shepard had mistaken to be as a camo pattern at first. The other weapon was marked as _FR SCAR-L Mk 26 PDR_ and was much shorter with the barrel length at 13 inches.

"The last weapon is shoulder fired," Conrad explained.

He brought the weapon readout up. It looked like a heavily beefed up bazooka. Most if not all of the weapons in the Alliance's arsenal could be wielded comfortably like a rifle; for enhanced accuracy. Like before, Jane noticed that there weren't any penetrating scans, but she was sure that the Doctor will get to that part later.

"It needs a code to be fired. Honestly trying to shoot it is tempting fateâ€¦ not something I want to do."

"Continue," Hackett said.

"It has a protective sheathe, and a huge barrel size as well as a clear warning label"

"Wait, a warning label?" Shepard interrupted.

Conrad nodded. "It says 'high powered direct energy weapon, use with extreme caution', that should speak volumes about what it can do."

"What about the armour?" Hackett inquired.

An expression of pure awe spread across the scientist's face. "You're going to enjoy this."

He led the two Alliance Officers out of the range and over to the adjacent lab room where the armour was held. It was still in the same condition as Jane had found it, complete with the support webbing for munitions and other miscellaneous equipment. All around the table were scans of the armour, but none were penetrating scans.

"I've noticed that you don't have any deep scans," Shepard said, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Ah yes, that," Conrad pursed his lips. "Let me show you what our scopes picked up."

A screen hovered over the armour, showing a scan at the nano-level. Jane could see the textured surface, perfectly honed and consistent in a hexagonal pattern. Within the crevices between the hexagons were what appeared to be nano-bots.

"This half a metric ton of technological brilliance is self-repairing with the nanites" why else would it have nanites?" Verner cleared his throat. "As you can see on this screen, the shields are active. They're not kinetic barriers. I tried using a laser to open it up but the shields stopped me."

"You mean, this is an energy shield," Hackett stated.

"Precisely. But it's always active. Look at the restraints; they're not touching the armour. And look at these grooves, there are designed to deflect sensors. Then you have the light absorbing surface. That's why we have that very dull look of the armour."

"You're saying that this armour possesses passive stealth capabilities?" Hackett asked with a hand on his chin.

"Yes," Verner nodded. "I'm only speculation" sorry, speculating here, but I think this armour's active stealth systems would be more than capable of baffling our best sensors" but sonar."

"Too bad we don't mass produce sonar sensors," Shepard commented dryly.

"But if this armour were to carry a weapon, then wouldn't its stealth capabilities be cancelled out?" Hackett asked.

"That's the thing; the weapons were designed like this too. They're

all painted and textured to be undetectable by radar."

Jane was impressed. Not only were the ancestors capable of delivering heavy firepower, but they could do so with stealth and precision. She concluded that their combat doctrine would've relied heavily on self-imitative and modularity.

"Do we know what's inside?" Hackett asked.

Verner shook his head. "We've scanned everything, including the visor. But it was all absorbed. We got nothing back."

Jane walked over to one of the displays, out of the corner of her eyes, she noticed Conrad yawning and rubbing his tired bloodshot eyes.

"When was the last time you slept, Doc?"

Verner snuffled his nose and glanced down at his watch.

"Twenty hours ago."

"Get some rest," Hackett encouraged, "you'll need it."

Shepard ears registered the sound of Velcro ripping apart. She turned just in time to see the armoured entity sit up from the table. In an instant, the alarms were blaring over the speakers. Without even thinking, Jane pushed the two older men back with her biotics and shielded them. Soldier's rushed into the lab; their M8's raised and ready. They formed a rough semi-circle around 117, with engineers prepping for an attack.

Orange hardlight shields were activated to provide power, additional shielding pylons offered extra protection. Two Commandos moved to extract Hackett, but he shrugged them off and gestured to Verner instead.

Jane ran her eyes along the armoured entity. It was much bigger at full height and very domineering – for lack of a better term. It walked forward, its footsteps purposely loud and intimidating. Faster than any normal eye could follow, the being drew a sidearm, and held it at hip height with the barrel angled downwards. Shepard knew that gesture, it meant that if 117 felt under threat, it would act accordingly. But as long as no shots were fired, it would talk. Regardless of its stance, the situation was still a Mexican standoff.

"I'm Admiral Hackett," Steve said sternly. "And you are?"

The armoured entity turned to face.

Goddamn it's tall, Shepard's mind wandered. Her stomach was doing somersaults and her ribs threatened to be turned into powder by her beating heart. Her skin pricked too, as if she was under the hot Australian sun.

"Commander One-One-Seven," a deep male baritone, English-speaking voice replied. It sounded hollow, disembodied and artificial, but human. It or rather he, did not sound like EDI. EDI did not sound detached and cold. But this voice did, ironically making it more

human.

Shepard could write an entire essay on how this voice sounded, but if she was to sum it up, she would say it sounded desensitised, cold and yet filled with years of wisdom and pain. She knew then that she would never forget how _his_ voice sounded.

"What should we call you?" Shepard asked. Somehow, calling him _Commander One-One-Seven_ did seem very _efficient_.

"Chief," he answered. His aim relaxed just a tad, the pistol was angled further down.

The air was still tense though. Soldiers were continually readjusting their grips. But Jane had spent years learning how to read body language " particularly those in armour. The man standing in front of her didn't seem fazed in the slightest. Either his armour was all it was cracked up to be and more _or_ he was an utter idiot. Shepard doubted the latter _severely_.

Or he's bluffing, a small voice chirped within her.

"Were you awake this whole time?" She asked.

The way he had gotten up was so _calm_, as if he had planned the whole thing out. A slight nod was all he gave for an answer.

"What do you want from us?"

"What do you want from me?" he countered.

"What are you?" Hackett asked. He gestured for the men to stand down.

Shepard followed suit and dropped her biotic field.

"Human," he answered.

Smart ass, Jane thought dryly. She looking at the seven foot tall giant, a small part of her wanted to call _bullshit_. It was feasible that humans could grow over seven feet, _but_ those were extremely rare occurrences. Judging by the armour tailored for him and including the serial number, she concluded that his height was an _expected_ quality. The dimensions of the armour were a clear indication that a body filled out most of it.

"What was that bunker we found you in?" Jane asked.

The Chief turned his steely gaze on her. Though she couldn't see his eyes, she could feel them drill through her skull.

"You are Commander Jane Alice Shepard," he said, taking her by surprise. "Graduated with a Suma Cum Laude at the Alliance Military Academy, lost your entire command after being ambushed by a Thresher Maw, and still managing to hold back a batarian onslaught to defend fleeing colonists."

It was hard to tell, but Shepard could swear that she heard a tone of admiration in his voice.

"You were then sent to train to participate in the N-Seven Program where you graduated with a High Distinction. Soon after, you joined the Asari Military School to improve upon your biotics and help expand the Alliance's biotic training."

Now there was a level of disdain in his voice. But it wasn't because of jealousy, no, it was because of the fact that she was effectively a poster girl. Her achievements blasted all over the extranet for the entire galaxy to see. Jane too wasn't too pleased with the fact that most of her life story had been displayed for everyone to read, but something inside her said that the Chief did not have conventional access to this information. This was his way of exercising his skill without appearing hostile.

Smart.

"You are the First Human Spectre, tasked with hunting down a more experienced agent."

It wasn't lost on her on how much emphasis he put on "experienced", she could literally feel his _'what the fuck?_' expression.

"After the Battle of the Citadel, you were tasked with hunting down the Geth remnants, only to be attacked and killed by a Collector ship, then recovered and revived by Cerberus."

Shepard's eyes widened in shock. She felt that icy hand return to her heart, and that blasted heat beating down on her again. That type of information wasn't over the extranet. Everything about her demise had been myths and folklore thinking. Hell, there were so many rumours about her that it could fill an anthology. But there was nothing about her being spaced by Collectors. Hence the following information was even more disturbing.

The Illusive Man " or Timmy as she liked to call him " would never release that kind of information. He preferred to work in secrecy, only omitting details and revealing information when absolutely necessary. There was nothing logical about him blabbing on about how he revived Shepard, he knew that the rumours about her with Cerberus was already enough of a hindrance.

"How the hell did you find that out?" Shepard asked, her voice laced with venom.

There was no way the Chief was bluffing. She knew it.

"Guess," his voice rumbled.

Then it all fell together. Everything all made sense now.

"You wanted us to come in and take you out of the bunker. You knew we were coming. You needed to play your cards right," Shepard deducted. "If you came out shooting, you weren't going to see the sun again. If you came out, we would've shot you or carried you off without you knowing anything about us you were stalling to get information ballsy move."

A slight nod was all she had to confirm her theory.

"I mean you no harm," he said, holstering his sidearm

"Yeah," Shepard snorted, "that's what they all say before they blow everything sky high."

She scolded herself for losing her professionalism. But it was clear he had hacked into Alliance Networks, which meant he knew about her Cerberus involvement through the Network. That would've only been possible if Ashley had written a detailed report after Horizon.

"Where do we go from here?" Hackett asked. "You've breached our networks."

"You have questions, I have answersâ€|"

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_UNSC Archive Entry â€" Vehicles and Armoured Warfare (extract)**

>by LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes_

_In comparison to our 21__st__ Century counterparts, the vehicles used by the UNSC during the Human-Covenant War are woefully under-equipped and armoured. Warthogs back then exposed their occupants, and the gunner was in a perilous position. Light unarmoured vehicles are generally used by QRFs and Spec Ops to allow rapid deployment and extraction, but to have them be used widespread without any form of protection was and still is a callous idea._

However, with recent overhauls and implementation of Directive-CD2341-EDK (colloquially referred to as "Key in the car" manual), our people and vehicles are safer and more effective.

_Titan MkIV Walker__, first walker to be put into mass production. It is most effective as a mop-up vehicle to clear out any IEDs or urban pacification. Combat simulations show that it is ineffective at taking armoured divisions head on, its height of ten metres make it an easy target for tank gunners. However, because of its height, it is extremely effective at clearing out Flood infestations._

_The __M997 Atlas MBT__ serves as the mainstay tank in our arsenal, superseding the Scorpion and Grizzly all together. We've gone back to earlier principles of tank crews â€" teams of three; Commander, Driver and Gunner. Combat simulations have shown an increase in combat effectiveness, with a faster firing rate, the Atlas can outclass an entire platoon of Grizzly Tanks with relative ease. Its weight is also evenly dispersed over six treads (similar to the Grizzly Prototype), allowing it to traverse over marshlands at high speeds â€" on-road: 120km/h. Additional Survival Kit also increases the durability and longevity of the Atlases. Field testings show that the Atlas's shields are capable of withstanding a direct hit from a Scarab Walker.

>(Current model in service is the M99A1 â€" no discernible upgrades. For the foreseeable future, there will not be an A2).

_M998 Ares Ultra-Heavy Tank__, the Atlas chassis combined with the Rhino lead to the creation of the Ares. The idea behind this tank is to be used for ultra-heavy assaults, with its defences capable of

wearing out heavy barrages. It is capable of taking on a Scarab walker, and possesses enough capabilities to engage heavy enemy air assets. Its tri-rotating-barrel main gun allows it to suppress and destroy enemy positions with a heavy amount of firepower. Because of its "slow" speed of 70km/h (on-road), the Ares is recommended for deployment when there is a clear ground objective to be taken or held. i.e. when the enemy is invested in defending a certain area or is intent with taking UNSC held positions.

>However, because of its size, deployment is limited to open fields.
Application for this tank is limited, but if used correctly, it can and will save ample amounts of resources that would've been used for alternative solutions.

>(Current model in service is the M998A7)

_M510 "Mammoth" Siegework/Ultra-Heavy Mobile Anti-Aircraft Weapons Platform,___ this vehicle serves as a mobile command centre as well as support and logistics, bringing heavy ordinance to the field whilst providing fire support to frontline troops.

>(Current model in service is the M510A15 " see Report-AV128M510 for more)_

_M312 Heavy Recover Vehicle___, see report for more._

_Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Quick-Reaction Utility Vehicle "Bullhound",___ like the Warthog, the Bullhound is capable of being outfitted for any task. Its bigger frame offers increased stability and protection as well as a larger payload. " See original report for more_

_M14 Warthog___, the M14 has been outfitted with doors, stronger hull and armour plating to increase survival and durability. Lighter variants are stripped down to offer rapid embarking and disembarking of occupants. But the main change is moving the gun turret to the centre of the frame rather than the back, and expansion of the frame increases vehicle stability as well as a greater payload capacity and safety for passengers.

>(Current model in service is the M14D7)

Conclusion: With the reintroduction of heavier vehicles, soldiers are offered more protection, thus increasing their operational capacity. Armoured warfare must be like a bow, strong yet flexible. Vehicles must be fast but not at the expense of protection, at the same time, vehicles must avoid situations where they would come under heavy fire.

****XXxxXX****

**Sam's notes: So as you can all see here, Andirithir and I have gone with a massive tech overhaul after many hours of researchâ€| seriously; those documentaries and combat doctrines are long to shift through. Also the original author would like to say this:**

â€|

****To those of you who have just joined usâ€| I am so sorry, but the next chapter (if it has no "REWRITE" marked at the top, will confuse the hell out of you.)****

****This chapter was originally the one where the Chief joins Shepard**

and so on. But as you can see, this rewrite has postponed that.**

The premise of the next non-rewritten chapter is my old and horrible writing style, where the Chief has already joined Shepard and they're off to kick ass.

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**Wellâ€| that certainly sounds like our friend doesn't it? That was the gist of what he was saying when he heard that I was going to post the first two rewrites.**

**Well, please leave a review. My question to you all is, how have we done with the rewrite and what did you like about it?**

**Thank you to "Rirey" and "Arec or Aristair" for Beta-ing**

**Sam**

3. Spartan and Spectre (Rewrite)

**Rewrite Chapter 3 is here,**

**It has also come to our attention that some of you didn't read the last message placed in Chp2 Rewrite, or read the full extent of the message in "chp"59.**

**We made it clear that the rewrite will significantly upset the flow of the ME2 Arc.**

**A/N: Previous chapter, MC stated he was called "Chief".**

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"_If the enemy is only five meters away from you and they're shooting at youâ€| three things. One; shit's hit the fan. Two; you're doing something wrong. Or three; you are or _were_ a POW or hostage."

>**Major Lenard Barton ****(UNSC Airborne Corps)
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ALLIANCE RESEARCH FACILITY, BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA EARTH

Shepard craned her neck to the left, using her right arm to tilt her head further. The synovial joints popped as they released the pockets of gas. Rubbing her neck muscles and rolling her shoulders, she arched her upper back and felt the euphoric release. Then, she craned her head to the right, and felt a few more jolts.

Jane gave a sigh of relief as she the tension ebbed away. One of the technicians looked at her with discomfort, and she really couldn't blame him. But then again she really didn't care. The sensation felt good. A guilty pleasure of hers, it also worked to her advantage during interrogations.

"Whenever you're ready, Commander," an Interrogations Officer said, entering the observation room.

Picking up the datapad on the bench, Shepard waited for the security doors to part open and let her through. Her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting of the Spartan room. There was only a mirror, and sentry turrets at the corners, facing the table and three chairs in the centre of the room.

Her shoes clicked against the concrete floor as she strode confidently towards the seated behemoth.

Sitting in the metal chair â€" designed to hold up krogans â€" Shepard's eyes flickered across the reflective golden visor. She couldn't help but feel that she was the one being the interrogated and not the interrogator.

"Who are you?" Jane asked in a soft tone. She already knew who he was, and what people called him colloquially, this was more for just the cameras.

She didn't want to appear threatening or antagonise him in anyway, but at the same time she needed to appear in control. Shepard had faith in her biotic abilities, but she knew her limits and she wasn't sure if taking on the man in front of her was within those boundaries.

"Commander Sierra One-One-Seven," he replied.

His deep baritone disembodied voice sent chills down her spine. Her pulse slightly increased in pace. It sounded like his vocal chords were cybernetic.

Her eyes travelled down to his unrestrained hands. Officially, this was an interview. In any case, she doubted that any restraints they had in the base could hold him. He wasn't just a war machine; he had a sharp mind as well.

"What faction?" she asked.

"United Nations Space Command," he answered.

Jane's eyebrow arched ever so slightly. If she was to go on the assumption that the man sitting in front of her was a part of humanity's ancestors, then judging by their name, she could assume that they were democratic. However names could be deceiving. The word 'Command' lead her to believe that the UNSC was the military arm of the old conglomerate. She decided to confirm her evaluation.

"And what is the United Nations Space Command?"

"Handles exploration, scientific research and military operations."

"And your government?"

There was a slight hesitation.

"The United Earth Government."

"Democratic?"

He gave a short nod.

"What was the purpose of the facility that we found you in?"

"Designed to outlast a Hammer Down Protocol."

His short replies made the conversation seem awkward and one sided. Then again it wasn't a conversation but a question, if not an interrogation.

"I'm assuming the protocol was enacted then."

Another nod. It didn't take a genius to guess what a Hammer Down Protocol was. She opened the reports from the base on her datapad. The facility's clock said it was November 1st 3580. It was a close match to certain university research projects which attempted to piece together topographical, radiological and historical information.

"Can you tell us about your history? Something pertaining to the Human-Covenant War?"

The pause seemed more pregnant, she could even hear the soft breath he pulled in through the filters.

There had been books " or what was left of them " about the Human-Covenant War. They had been so weathered that all the information obtained from them was that it was a first contact war. Everything else was beyond legible. Judging from the way he reacted or lack thereof, Jane guessed that he was either a survivor or veteran.

"Began in twenty-five"

That was the last she heard before a white flash robbed her of her vision. She felt the ground rush up to meet her while peppered with sparks and debris.

Her temples throb and blood trickle down the side of her face. Her ears were ringing and her muscles were cramped. Everything moved around her like a foggy haze, the screams and alarms were still dull and muffled but everything moved slower than usual.

Instinctively she reached out and grabbed onto the table post, pulling herself under the safety of the metal surface. Furniture in this day and age was on the "indestructible" side of things.

"_Alert, hostiles in the facility. All non-combat personnel please proceed to lockdown or evacuation points. Combat personnel standby for orders,"_ the PA system blared.

"Hostiles moving" the Corporal never even finished.

A bullet crashed through his chest, sending him sprawling to the floor. Quickly, Shepard drew her Hoplite sidearm and squeezed the

trigger. The pistol barely kicked in her palms as it spat heavy calibre bullets in rapid succession. A trio of rounds caught the militiaman, by the door â€" dead centre. Instantly his shields were overloaded and armour punctured, blood flowed freely from the ragged alloy. He lost consciousness the moment he hit the floor.

"Fuck!" the Sergeant swore. "Wilbur, lay suppressive fire down the hall."

"Got it, Sarge."

The young soldier hefted the N7 Typhoon, rested the bipod atop the pile of rubble, and unloaded through the gaping hole down range. Shepard knew the attack was sloppy, and not Cerberus. If it was Cerberus, the attackers wouldn't have used a rocket launcher to breach the wallsâ€" or doors for that matter.

Looking around the room, she saw 117 taking cover beside the blown out doors with an N7 Valkyrie in his hands. It looked dwarfed and miniscule in his hands, like a short-short barrel rifle. She joined him on the other side and gave him a look.

He's not your enemy, Jane reminded herself.

"We need to get out of here!" the Lieutenant barked. "Leap frog it, gentlemen."

The men complied. Two Commandos vaulted through the wall and sprayed their weapons down range before throwing themselves into the cover of some alcoves. Wilbur kept his finger on the trigger, mowing down a number of LOKI mechs.

"Reloâ€" "

Wilbur's shields overloaded, his skull shattered a bullet drilled through his head.

"Man down!" a Commando cried.

Moving to the fallen body, he dragged Wilbur away while Shepard retrieved the Typhoon.

"Swap with me," she said to the Chief.

With a nod, they traded their weapons. Slapping in a new thermal clip, Jane zeroed in on a woman armed with an M8. She had some military training, moving from cover to cover in a sidestepping fashion. But basic training never held up against N7 level. With superior accuracy, Shepard drilled a bullet through the woman's chest. The damage done from the temporal cavity was more than enough to damage her heart. She died just as the bullet punched through her back.

"Do you know where Hackett is?" Shepard called.

The Lieutenant shook his head. "No ma'am, he could've been moved to lockdown or evac."

That's not like him, Jane frowned.

"Okay, let's move."

117 instantly took point. He held the Typhoon hi right, while projecting a Hard Light shield with his left. Rounds bounced off the sapphire blue surface as he slowly pushed forward and covered everyone's advance.

Outside laid the three bodies, two belonged to Alliance Marines and the third was the Interrogations Officer from Alliance Intelligence. Shepard stepped over them and followed 117 closely behind. His ability to wield an LMB with one arm was nothing short of remarkable. He used the Typhoon as if it was a sidearm, easily bringing it to bear on whatever target were in his sights. Spent shells arced in a spectacular fashion before clattering onto the metal deck, as the weapon roared.

Wilbur had armour piercing mods on the gun, allowing the Chief to shred through whatever cover the rogues could find and kill them before they could react.

Remembering the way in, Shepard planned a route out.

"We need to get to the control room, and restore systems," she said. "One-One-Seven, you're on point. I'll guide you."

She expected some form of argument from the Commandos, but none of them voiced their concerns about having to follow a giant behemoth. There were more things at stake, and Shepard had a feeling that 117 had something to do with the attack. She wasn't saying he was responsible, but he could be the whole reason why the base is under assault. In any case, she could use some reinforcements, maybe even call in her team if the COMs hadn't been knocked out, or if regulations allowed her to carry her own COM with her.

Moving down the hallway, resistance grew increasingly heavier. Bullets shattered against the blue hard-light shield as they weathered through the storm. Shepard swore as some of the incendiary rounds crack against the walls, sending burning flecks onto her skin.

Pushing into a large foyer, Shepard ordered the Commandos to fan out. She took cover behind a large metal desk, taking the time to reload her weapons with fresh thermal clips. Looking around the vast area, her instincts told her that this place was an

"Ambush!"

Helmets popped over the mezzanine above, militia firing missiles down into the Alliance soldiers. There was no way the 81st Commandos were going to avoid it in time. Shepard's body flared up as she willed a biotic barrier into existence in front of the hapless men. But the armoured giant was faster, moving in between the missiles and the target, 117's hard-light shields bore the brunt of the impact, the blue panels winked red and faded from existence.

Damn he's fast.

Retreating back into cover, Jane noticed that the volume of fired had significantly slackened. She strained her ears and focused onto the voice of the militia's leader. Peeking over the tabletop, she noticed

that he was wearing Alliance armour.

"We only want The Ancestor, give him to us, and you will be free to leave."

"Bullshit," Jane muttered to herself.

"Shepard, I need to get to my weapons," 117 said.

The Commander frowned. She wasn't big on the idea of rearming the armoured behemoth with his weapons of surgically precise destruction. Then again, it was better him than the rogues.

"How about a trade?" the leader asked. "We'll trade you Hackett for the Prophet."

Prophet? The hell?

Edging out of the protective desk, Shepard's eyes darted over to the mezzanine and saw Admiral Hackett. The man who held him hostage was an Alliance Colonel.

"If you wanted him? Why'd you shoot at him!" Jane taunted.

Silence hung in the air as tensions climbed.

"The fuck do we do?" a loyal Commando swore.

There were only five loyalists remaining, excluding 117 and Hackett. Everyone else must've evacuated or had been shot to kingdom come.

She looked over to the man who was the indirect cause of all of this. They all referred to him as some kind of messiah. But why would they have shot at him if he was their prophet? It was understandable to why they blew up half the base; they were executing a rescue mission.

Jane's mind ran through a list of scenarios. There was a Colonel here who was in bed with the militia, an 81st Commando willingly turned on his own. All of it spoke of something moreâ€¦ sinister.

They're not here to extract himâ€¦ it's a test.

But who could possibly want to test him like this, and why? There were far more logical and less expensive ways of assessing his abilities.

Timmy? No. Not him. He wouldn't waste Cerberus resources like this. Could be someone pulling the Fundies' strings.

Shepard looked at the remaining loyalists, and gestured for them to spread out. The men complied without question. Closing her eyes, she immersed herself in the flow of Dark Energy; wispy violet tendrils shrouded her body.

With a deep breath, she leapt from cover and shot forward. The Colonel couldn't react fast enough, before he could even squeeze the trigger, the Spectre had already crashed to him in a wave of biotic power.

Shoving Hackett to safety, Jane threw up a shield and expanded it rapidly outwards. The barrier picked up everything in its path with thunderous force. Men were tossed like ragdolls, their bones snapping like toothpicks.

A deafening roar filled the air as the Chief opened up with the Typhoon. Shepard spun to see dozens of men mowed down with unnerving accuracy and speed. Every round leaving the light-machine gun found it's mark, punching through armour and ripping up flesh.

Taking the initiative to strike, the Spectre charged at a LOKI mech â€" ripping the machine apart with explosive force. Using the twisted metal shards as projectiles, she hurled them into the nearest rogue, an Alliance Corporal. Shepard left the man clutching at his bleeding neck as she shifted to her next target.

Building up biotic charge, Shepard propelled herself in a beam of violet and slammed her knee into the side of a LOKI mech. The sheer power behind such shocking force, concentrated into one point was more than enough to drill through the drone and turn the torso of the woman behind it into a fine red mist. Stabilising herself on the ground, Shepard dragged in a deep breath.

Left arm outstretched, wispy tendrils leapt from her hand and latched onto a rogue at the far side of the room. His movements were clearly hampered as the dark channel drained away at him. With a flick of the wrist, Shepard ended him with a warp. The man didn't get a chance to scream when dark energy tore him into oblivion.

Visibly shocked by the display of power, the remaining rogues and militia â€" whom Shepard believed to fundamentalists â€" hesitated for the briefest of moments. It was more than enough for the Chief to turn the table. Using his thrusters, Shepard saw as he jumped onto the railings and held himself there.

What?

It defied knowledge. Half a metric ton of the most advanced military hardware she had seen, hung onto the metal panels which ran along the edge of mezzanine. Leaping over the barrier, he grabbed onto an unsuspecting rogue and pulled him over. The rogue was sent screaming to his death, seconds later a sickening wet crunch soon followed.

Vaulting over the barrier, he slammed the heel of his armoured boot into a LOKI mech's chest. The mass produced hardware didn't even stand a chance. Its chest caved in and sparks were sent flying as it collapsed to the ground. With installed failsafe systems the mech detonated, its shrapnel glancing off the Chief's golden barrier.

And as quickly as her retaliation began, it ended just as abruptly. Everything had happened so fast that Admiral Hackett had just policed an M8 Avenger from a fallen rogue.

"We're clear," Shepard gasped

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Biotics, John rationalised.

An inherent ability to manipulate dark energy through neural impulses and element zero " he recalled similar experiments like that during his talks with Doctor Halsey's son. But most of those experiments were, as the Doctor had said; "At the dinner table experiments."

Shepard was undeniably powerful, the fear he had seen in the attackers' eyes were unmistakable. If the footage he had downloaded were of any measure, the Spectre was extremely gifted in her rare abilities. Her leadership quality was something to be noted as well. Training with ONI's best and brightest had taught him to acknowledge and harness the world of infinite information, but also be weary of it. If the dozens of sources he read from were to be trusted, biotics were extremely taxing. The individual required higher calorie intakes as well as a constant need to replenish electrolytes and blood sugar levels.

Should the Spartan be locked in a battle with a biotic " Shepard for example; then he would need to either outlast her in endurance or use stealth and neutralise her quickly. Preferably the later as it would minimise the amount of injuries he would take.

Looking down onto the mezzanine below, John could see the Commandos look back at him and Shepard with awe.

"Which way?" the Spartan asked.

He already knew the way; he had already scanned the entire base with his array of sensors. But he wanted to test Shepard's integrity " just in case he was walking into another trap.

"Your weapons," Shepard answered,

She was either showing a gesture of goodwill or she didn't want the weapons getting into the attackers' hands, or both. Either way, it really didn't matter.

Following the Spectre, the group backtracked through the heavily damaged walls, filled with smouldering holes. Mech parts, spent thermal clips littered the floor. Forming a protective formation around the Admiral, the Commandos kept interlocking fields of fire as they moved throughout the facility.

John guessed they had wiped out the larger force " or the enemy had retreated and were awaiting reinforcements. He wondered if Hackett was going to see eye to eye with Shepard. So far the man had offered no protest on rearming the Spartan. He would have to go on good faith and hoped everything went for the best.

Doubtful.

Reaching the lab doors John had recognised earlier, he covered Hackett as the Admiral entered emergency protocol overrides.

"Dammit," Hackett muttered. "Systems have gone into lockdown."

Using the armour's sensors, the Chief could see that the doors were no more than six inches of reinforced steel. He gestured for the

group to stand aside as he reached into the MJOLNIR's hidden compartment and drew out his energy sword.

The blade crackled to life, illuminating the grey-white halls in a purple-blue hue. Lances of electricity sparked along the length of the plasma surface as wispy ionised air trailed in its wake. Metal hissed, and sparks rained down onto the tiles as molten steel slowly poured down the doors. Soldiers around him looked in awe as the sword burned through the door as if it was plywood.

"After you," he said, deactivating the weapon.

Shepard looked at him warily and then at the sizeable hole, before going through. John followed straight after and jogged lightly over to the bench where his weapons were. All the functional ones he took and the rest he destroyed with his blade. If he had Cortana with him, she would've been able to wipe-out the data from Verner's research. Regardless, the Alliance didn't learn anything new from the rifles, it didn't give them any new edge. Fortunately, the scientists weren't able to piece together the fact that the SCAR was far more flexible than they initially thought.

"Got your gear? Let's go," Jane urged.

Her eyes flickered down to molten metal pooling on the table top. If she or Hackett were annoyed for having those weapons destroyed, they didn't show it.

With Shepard taking the lead the group made their way to the Command and Control room with utmost care. Once they regained control, they could restore communication. But the Fundamentalists weren't making it easy for them. Living members had fallen back to stronghold positions while mechs were sent out to harass the group. Armed with the SCAR, John could easily make short work of the skirmishers.

Though the problem lay with the doors, sections were sealed off, forcing the group to wait for the Spartan to cut a sizeable hole through.

"Command and Control is just up the hall and down the left," Hackett informed.

The 81st fanned out into a rough delta pattern. There were bodies everywhere, some were Alliance Marines, others were civilian staff; all were torn to bloody shreds.

"I've got five hostiles inside," John said.

The others looked at him with surprise and suspicion. Logically, he would've never given away his armour's ability. But he needed to gain their trust and he couldn't risk any of them getting killed, particularly Shepard and Hackett. The two Alliance officers were his only hope of not being locked up again and become some lab rat for another research team.

Shepard gave him a look; he couldn't understand what kind of messaging she was sendingâ€¦ probably none. Didn't matter, the rogues needed to be ousted to ensure his _safety_.

"We can't breach that door," the Commando Lieutenant said.

"At least not fast enough," John added.

"What about the shoulder launcher on your back," Shepard suggested.
"The M-Seven G/GNR."

John looked at her.

"Unless you want collateral damage," the Spartan said.

"Better than nothing," Hackett spoke. "Do it, Chief."

Swapping weapons, John shouldered the M7 laser. He waited for the Alliance soldiers to take cover behind the desks and the security checkpoint before spooling up the weapon. Hearing the soft hum, he rested his finger on the trigger and breathed, watching his HUD monitoring the charge. Unlike its predecessor the M7 G/GNR fired instantaneously when the trigger was pulled and spooled up passively.

The bar pulsed blue; he tensed up his shoulders and crouched. He squeezed and a brilliant blue lance struck through the door, burning and ripping it apart, showering the area with sparks. It sounded like a buzz saw and an electrical storm. Like the SCAR, the M7 G/GNR fired multiple laser, particle and hard-light beams at its target.

He shouldered the weapon, letting its capacitors cool. But Shepard was already on the move. Before he could even level his SCAR, she had disappeared through the breach with violet eldritch trailing behind her. Moving through, John had expected to be greeted by a volley of fire " nothing. All eyes were focused on the Spectre.

She moved around too fast for the untrained eye to see. But augmented eyes watched her every move, watched how energy flowed through her seamlessly. Jane pirouetted through the rogues ranks in the massive control room, ripping consoles out of the ground and hurling them at targets. Men and women screamed as they were crushed by her or ripped apart quickly and brutally.

It was almost frighteningly hypnotic watching her fight. She was like a wraith, a phantom, phasing in and out of existence like a Promethean Knight. One moment she was in the centre, hurling a man across the room, the next she was on the mezzanine above shooting rogues point blank.

Shepard was an impressive fighter to say the least, and dangerous. She preferred to take the fight up close and personal, John preferred to take out targets from a distance and remain concealed " it was just how he was trained for counter-insurgency operations. However he was more than capable of reaching out and striking the enemy.

Strafing to the left, the Spartan picked off a sniper before spinning on his axis to engage a rocket trooper. Both rogues fell with blood flowing freely from gaping wounds. The laser and the ion may have cauterised the wound, but the temporal cavity ripped apart flesh and stimulated the loss of the precious fluid.

In a matter of seconds, it was all over. The rogues lay dead, some no

more than faint smears on the wall. With the room secured, John watched Shepard allow herself some respite. Biotics was definitely taxing on the body.

Already she was seeking out supplements.

â€|

Sitting down in a chair, Shepard noticed the Chief analysing her. It was expected all things considered. Biotics was a relatively new thing to humanity and there was no real evidence to suggest that the UNSC had encountered it. She could be wrong, but she doubted they had intimate knowledge about the subject.

Shepard fished into one of her pockets and pulled out an energy bar. Discarding the wrapper, she scoffed down the supplement and ignored the bland flavour.

Should've brought a chocolate bar, she thought dryly before remembering what Chakwas had said.

"_Cut back on the chocolate and have fruit bar."_

She heard his heavy footfalls and was surprised she didn't notice it the first time while they were moving throughout the facility. Clearly he chose when and when not to be heard. Out of the corner of her eye she watched him walk over to the kitchenette and grab a bottle from the fridge.

"Shepard," he called.

Turning to face him, she raised an eyebrow.

"Catch," the Chief said.

The bottle of pineapple juice sailed through the area before coming to a soft halt, enshrouded by a violet mist. Shepard gently glided the beverage into her grasp, unscrewed the lid and downed the contents greedily.

Taking in a deep breath, she set the bottle down and looked over to Hackett.

"Communications restored, QRFs are moving to secure the facility. Your team has just called in, Shepard. They're waiting for you at your shuttle."

"I'll get going soon, but what do we do with him?" Jane asked, gesturing towards the Chief.

Hackett turned to the Commandos, and ushered them out of the room, ordering them to guard the doors.

"We saw what happened here," the Admiral said. "We can't risk it happening again."

Jane leaned back into her chair and placed a finger thoughtfully onto her chin, considering the options.

"I could use the extra help," She suggested. "He could come with me."

And we can draw attention away from Earth. Maybe buy Intelligence sometime to find out who's behind this."

Hackett turned his gaze onto the armoured giant. "What do you think?"

"What do you do?" he asked Shepard.

A grim smile crossed her lips.

"Rally a ragtag team to kill shit and eat bubble gum, all in the name of galactic peace and for a galactic government which can do shit all," she said nonchalantly. "You in?"

"If that is where I'm needed," he answered.

In Shepard's eyes it was the best cause of action. If he stayed on Earth, more _innocent_ people could get killed. If he went with her, they could redirect the violence elsewhere. And some of her crew were always itching for a fight as well. However the Chief himself was a bit of an enigma. She hadn't even seen his face or know his first name, yet he knew almost everything about her.

"We agree then?" Shepard asked.

A brief nod was all that was needed.

"Okay thenâ€¦ now how are we going to get you off planet side?" Jane pondered.

His armour was too conspicuous, and she doubted he would part with it so easily. He held the most advance military hardware known to the Alliance, attempting to recreate the exoskeleton would more than likely drive the economy into the ground. The serial number he gave, 117, was an indication that he was not alone.

"I'll need a crate," he said.

...

With reinforcements securing the facility, Shepard had to usher the Chief into a spare room and stood guard outside. A few minutes passed until the doors hissed upon. Jane had an idea of what the Supersoldier had in mind but it didn't prepare her for it. She took the moment to look at his face; he had rugged features, neatly cut brown hair, light stubble along his jawline and a faded scar curving over his right eye. His skin was a bit pale, it wasn't borderline unhealthy, though he could use more sun.

He had an eternal appearance, not as in the young and wide eyed immortal, but the true definition of ageless. It was practically impossible to gage his biological age. His skin was smooth and devoid of wrinkles but lacked the suppleness of youth, it lacked the glow. His eyes were sapphire blue, looking, burning into her own brown eyes. His eyes held no warmth, just an age old weariness and cold logicality.

The clothing he wore was civilian or at least _private contractor_. Sturdy shoes, beige pants, light grey top and a jacket â€" where he got the clothes, was beyond her. Most likely he had it stored

somewhere in his armour the whole time. She was simply amazed at his ability to look like any other civilian despite his size. It was what made him the perfect killer. Everything about his equipment to the way he methodically operated spoke of years of intense education and training. He was always focused, always seeking out the most optimal approach to solve a problem. If anyone thought he was a battering ram, then they would be sorely mistaken.

"Ready?" Shepard asked.

He pulled the massive crate marked _fragile_ out behind him and nodded. She noticed his slight hesitation moving down the corridor. He was still cautious, though most of all, he was uncomfortable outside his armour. When he had tossed her the bottle of juice, it meant that he knew a biotic's _her_ inherent flaw, her weakness. Now she knew his, he relied too much on his armour, relied too much on its ability to enhance his own. Or maybe it was all just a bluff in an attempt to divert away her attention from his true weakness _or to have her commit resources to something non-existent.

You're smart; I'll give thatâ€¦ again. Smart enough to be a spook._

The climb back to the surface was done so in silence, there wasn't much to talk about. Camaraderie would come later. Though he did toss her a bottle of juice, the act of throwing something to another person could be considered a sign of respect.

Shepard wasn't too sure what his motives are, but if it stood in the way of hers, she wouldn't hesitate to kill him. Though she doubted she would need to. Being able to do so was another story entirely.

Passing through the countless manned checkpoints, Shepard and the Chief finally reached the LZ. Wreckages had still yet to be cleared from the area, but there was enough space for shuttles to land and lift off. An Alliance one was already waiting to take them away from the base and into Brisbane. She helped 117 load the crate into the main hold, before embarking onto the craft.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking," the pilot said cheerily over the PA. "Good weather to have a barbie at the beach. We're expecting a nice flight into the city, so sit back and relax."

The shuttle engines flared, and it gently lifted off into the morning sky. Shepard was feeling the effects of sleep deprivation coupled with general fatigue. Nothing too serious, it was something she could easily shrug off. Jane had gone through far worse at the N7 Academy and she still pulled through with flying colours. If it could be helped, she'd rather not deal with any form of discomfort. Discomfort made a soldier lose focus and when a soldier loses focus, blues were killed.

As the craft soared over the city and made its approach to an airport, Shepard watched the man in front shift his gaze out the window. A forlorn expression quickly flashed across his face and faded away just as fast. In that one moment, he looked so infinitely tired. The Earth he knew and had left behind was gone, in its place rose the Alliance. Maybe things were the same, maybe they weren't,

but one thing for Shepard was certain; the aurora could never be recaptured.

When the shuttle landed, the Chief was already on his feet and ready to go. Shepard waited for the hatched to open first; she helped him ease the crate out of the hold and onto the platform. Looking around the airfield, she spotted the shuttle she had rented for the ride down.

"Hey Shepard, you look like shit," Jack said bluntly, arms folded and leaning against the craft.

"Could be worse, all things considered," Kasumi said optimistically. "And who's this?"

She gestured towards the Supersoldier.

"Chiefly," Shepard _lied_.

"Nice to meet you, Chiefly," Goto extended a hand. The Spectre knew her friend didn't buy into it, but was thankful that the Master Thief didn't question her about it.

He took it without hesitation. Jane had half expected him to crush her squad mate's hand, but it Goto's hands were left unscathed.

"Alright, so how are we going to get this through customs or get it onto the ship?" Kasumi asked, eyeing the crate with great curiosity.

"Careful, curiosity killed the cat," Jack shrugged.

"And satisfaction brought her back," Goto countered.

"Girls, behave," Shepard chided. "One thing at a time."

With the crate inside the shuttle, Jane made doubly sure that none of the locks were breached and that it was safely secured.

This is going to be a long ride, she sighed inwardly.

Turning on the engines and the autopilot, she steeled herself for a long trip back to her ship.

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"_Dogfights in an atmosphere are vastly different to dogfights in space. Without air resistance or the need for banking turns, dogfights in space are a whole different story entirely â€" different to dogfights in low-orbit. However with the emergence of new technology, low-orbit dogfights are near obsolete. For fighter engagements in the vacuum of space, we originally perceived cubes to be the most efficient form of space combat. There is no drag and thus no need for large banking turns. Aircrafts can quickly swing on their axis without the need to change course and engage enemies from all directions as fast as the pilot can react. But keeping in with our combat doctrines of modularity and flexibility, our next generation fighters can engage in atmospheric and vacuum combat, onboard computer systems will assist the pilot to adapt to every environment

appropriately."

>_**-Air Chief Marshal William Hersh **_**(UNSC Air Force)**

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**A/N: Once again, thanks to Carleen, Arec and Rirey for beta testing the story with an extra hats off to Carleen for her

illustrious**** sense of **_**humour**_**.**

Hope you all enjoyed this chapter, and please leave a review to let me know what you think.

4. The Ospery

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**NORMANDY SR-2**

John sat in his "room" and cleaned his weapons. He had done it so many times that he could easily do it blindfolded. He was unclear of what to think about Shepard and her team. Shepard seems to be a kind hearted womanâ€| with a dead aim. Her team, well that was another story. The Spartan thought that a team accompanying one of the galaxy's heroes would be extremely disciplined and soldiers. But they were mercs and warriors, which was a cause of concern. It meant that they probably didn't follow rules of engagement or do not have that military precision. He certainly did miss the professionalism in the UNSC armed forces. He had the feeling that Shepard still does not trust him fully. He felt truly alone right now, no one knew his past; no one knew who he truly was or what he went through. He hoped that one day he would be able to return _home_. To where things made sense.

John ran his gloved hand through his neatly cropped brown hair and then rubbed his forehead.

The Spartan checked his armour; so far everything about it was clean. He took the moment to reflect, he had to find a way to get back to the Ark, but he doubt that the Portal was still functional. New Mombasa and Voi were some of the first places bombarded. But he placed those thoughts aside as he stared into the abyss of space, there were more pressing concerns at hand. John needed to further his knowledge in his knew environment; so far, he had acquired information on all recorded species regarding their culture, combat strengths and weaknesses. The species that posed most threat to the Spartan would have to be the Asari, due to their biotic abilities. There were also data Yahg, and it showed that the species were grounded on their own planet for their aggressive tendencies as they had slaughtered Citadel delegates attempting to form political relations with them.

So with his knowledge on recorded species up to date, John flicked on his laptop and decided to read articles on Kinetic Barriers, Weapons, Planets, and general history. In truth the Spartan didn't really know what to do, he was following his training, adapt, engage and survive. He found it odd that he was helping a world in which he held no real stake in. He could now understand why some humans ran instead of fighting alongside the UNSC. That was the sad truth; John had no

stake in the H.S.A. or the Citadel for that matter. Yet he still fought with Shepard, it was his purpose. The past few weeks had been hectic and left little time for the Spartan to wind down and consolidate his current predicament. Sure he was to protect humanity but the more he thought about it, the H.S.A. was no longer UNSC humanity. That was where John's true allegiance lay, with the UNSC. But for now, he decided he would help Shepard achieve her goal, and maybe find a way to get back _home_ in the process.

The Spartan leaned back into the chair and grabbed a long cylindrical object that had been clamped onto his thigh. It was a hit with a slightly curved end and had ornamental carvings into its chrome cover. The weapon had been a gift from the Arbiter to John, it is an energy sword which had been modelled after a Chinese Miao Dao Sword, it was created by the finest Sangheili Weapons Smiths. The Spartan had never used the weapon in combat before, as he preferred to take out his targets from a distance, but he knew the psychological toll of these weapons. He had seen Elites apply it in Combat many times during the final days of UNSC's presence on Earth. Whenever an energy sword would crackle to life, enemy Grunts tend to run away in fear, allowing the Coalition time to cut down the Brutes and Yahg. The image of one being cut in half in a swift stroke would terrify many, and in war, if one had the psychological edge over the enemy, then the said person has effectively won.

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After getting something to eat, Jane spent most of her time in her quarters and started to brood. She always found the soft music and the gentle lights relaxing as she lay on her bed in her casual fatigues.

John, possibly the best soldier and the greatest mystery on her ship, it didn't exactly help that he wasn't going to open up to anything. He kept mostly to himself and appeared when asked for. That kind of behaviour normally indicated a soldier that had a traumatic experience yet is still held together by sheer willpower, discipline and determination of seeing something through. Shepard didn't exactly like that, there was a strong possibility that during combat, the Spartan would snap and endanger all the lives around him. If she wanted her team to be fully functional and a _partner_ to trust, she'd have mandate some kind of therapy session for him. With her being the _therapist_, which in a twisted sense, was a nice way of saying interrogator, but Jane knew that if she was going to talk to the Chief, it would have to be off the _Normandy_ and on a planet. Jane wouldn't be too surprised that the Illusive Man would have the ship bugged. However, Shepard had thoroughly swept the ship for bugs and it came clean. So if all went swimmingly, the Illusive Man will never know about John until it's too late. Jane had already talked to Miranda about not mentioning the Super Soldier to Illusive Man, which Miranda was only too grateful to comply, especially after recent events. Though the Cerberus Operative did mention about her head being on a pike if Illusive Man ever learnt about her "insubordination, yet truth be told, Miranda was never really found of Illusive Man, some of the projects he had her oversee made her stomach churn.

Jane hated the Illusive Man with a passion, half the time she wondered if he actually did have humanity's best interest at heart rather than personal game, on many occasions it seemed like the

latter.

Shepard then dropped the matter for the time being and got changed into fatigues; it was time for a work out session.

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"_INCOMING!" yelled Fred, right before he and Kelly were engulfed by plasma flames._

"_JOHN!" cried Linda, "JUMP!"_

The Spartan felt himself being tossed into the air, his skin blistering from the searing heat as his dual shields overloaded. He felt himself crashing into the dirt. But then something happened, something John never expected to see. It was a thick tentacle that looked like it was composed of thousands of dead bodies. He knew that skin texture. And once the ashes had settled did John see the monument of sins, Gravemind.

"_Child of my makers," a deep low voice said in iambi pentameter, "your world has fallen, had you chose to join your voice with mine, together, we would have sung everlasting victory."_

"_He's right John," said a feminine voice, it sounded like Cortana's except older._

Then one of the bodies on the tentacles stirred.

"_It is inevitable John."_

The Spartan watched in horror as the body detached its torso from the tentacle. John felt immobilised; he couldn't accept what he was seeing. It was too painful to accept what he was seeing. The body was Dr Halsey, half decayed and yet still whole enough to be identified. Her skin was pale and pasty, the life had faded from her eyes, and her arms were grotesquely fused into the Gravemind. She was becoming one with it.

John's eyes burst openâ€¦ it was another nightmare. Even the Gravemind still haunted him to this very day. He could see the irony in it all. The _Thinking Dead_ still haunts the living, even if they've come to pass.

The Spartan took a moment to collect himself and sat up.

"I need to see someone about this," he muttered.

He pulled himself up and swung his legs off the couch.

His HUD indicated that he was sweating from his forehead and upper body. He had slept in his suitâ€¦ again. The Spartan didn't bother taking it off as he left his quarters and proceeded to the kitchen and quickly grabbed what appeared to be soup and a bottle of water. He then quickly returned back to his room and set his food down so that he could take off his helmet. After setting down his gear, John tucked into the soup, it tasted like beef broth and potatoes which he found to be quite pleasing. Although when he munched on what appeared to be meat, he couldn't help but chuckle lightly. No matter how

advanced humanity had become, dehydrated meat always tasted wrong.

The Spartan finished the rest of the contents in the bowl and placed his gloves back on. He then proceeded out of his room with his helmet tucked under one arm and his finished meal in the other and the bottle of water in his pouch. Many of the crew were surprised to see face of the armoured enigma and kept staring as he entered the kitchen. The blue hue of the lighting was a comforting effect to the Spartan; it also reminded him of Cortana.

As he headed for the doors, it opened and revealed Shepard with her brown hair tied in a ponytail and wearing a t-shirt, shorts and sport shoes.

"Shepard," John nodded courteously.

"Chief, I'm heading to the gym, care to join me?" she asked.

Well I have nothing better to do, John thought. "Sure, lead the way."

The two navigated through the hallways of the ship, and as John looked around and at the reflective surfaces, a small smile spread across his lips.

"Penny for your thoughts?" asked Jane as the two walked.

"The military ships I've been on, luxury themes were far from the engineers' minds."

"Care to explain that one?"

"Well UNSC ships don't have designer themes; it's just grey metal corridors with the generic rectangular shape, white lights and signs. That's it."

"Sounds bland."

"Our ships were just built for war; they weren't made to look pretty. The newer models are less of an eyesore."

"So what you're saying is, H.S.A. ships are prettier than UNSC ships?" chuckled Shepard.

"Effectively, yes."

"Well we need to sit down and have a talk about you sometime, obviously groundside."

"I take it, that's a dinner and a movie followed by a walk on the beach?" John joked.

Shepard rolled her eyes at him, "you do have a sense of humour, looks like Miranda owes me a drink. But I'd like a full story from you, rather than a half-heartedly told one."

John smiled at the fact that this brief conversation had made him a bit closer with Shepard; this in turn had put some of his doubts to ease. Jane was clearly a delightful woman, very kind, gentle, and had

strong morals, yet against all logic, she goes running around ripping mercs and pirates with her biotics and slots them between their eyes with her rifle.

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Jane found John to be a likeable person; it was probably due to him not wearing his helmet which gave him a more human outlook. But when that helmet was on, he looked like a killing machine, precise and horrifyingly efficient. She couldn't help but wonder what his earlier life was. So far, all she had known about him was that he was part of the UNSC that existed on Earth well over millennia ago, and they were in possession of technology that would rival Protheans. But then they were engaged in a long war that pushed humanity to the edge of extinction which caused drastic measures to have been taken. If all of it was true, than the H.S.A. are remanent of the UNSC. It seemed farfetched, but evidence seemed to point on the contrary.

"Well, here we are, the gym," said Shepard as the two walked in.

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>"Armour off," said Shepard, "I don't know how much you weigh in that thing, but it looks heavy and I don't want the machines to be broken."

"Okay," replied John.

The gym seemed more welcoming than any UNSC gym John had ever been in, the blue hue and the curvature of the walls drew away from the fact he was on a warship. He eyed a free corner and moved over there. The Spartan's armour popped with a hiss of air as the seal was broken. The armour plates then began to unlock allowing John to take them off and set them down with relative ease. Finally he had to remove the black bodysuit, the Hydrostatic Crystal/Positronic Brain layer peeled off him, and he folded them up neatly. John completed the feat in less than three minutes as he had done it on numerous occasions.

The Spartan now stood in UNSC fatigues which consisted of a t-shirt, pants and combat boots.

John headed over to the treadmill, and set it to maximum, evidently these weren't made to cater Spartans but it would just have to do.

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Shepard began to start by lifting weights, her entire torso tensed as she lifted the weights, it was a testament to how hard she could punch, and in this case, hard enough to knock out a Turian with one hit. Once done, she moved onto other workout stations, but after half an hour Jane began to notice how long the droning sound had gone on for. It was the sound of the treadmill's engines and surface whirring. She stopped her routine to look up and still found John running at the same pace, and hadn't broken a sweat. The brunette could instantly tell that he was a Super Soldier of a totally different league.

_Thirty minutes and he's still running faster than any of us can, not

a single drop of sweat. That's got to be something_, thought Shepard.

"Commander Shepard," it was EDI, "there is an urgent message from Admiral Hackett," the monotonous voice said.

"Got it," replied Shepard, "I'll take it in my quarters."

Jane got up and grabbed a towel, and wiped the perspiration from her face. She then exited the gym and headed back to her room.

Once in her quarters, Shepard walked briskly over to her console and switched it on. Hackett then appeared on screen.

"Shepard good to see you," the Admiral greeted.

"Likewise."

"How's our guest doing?"

"Fine, and very impressive."

"Very good," the Admiral nodded, "listen, our Intel boys have gotten wind of undercover Eclipse mercs on Eden Prime. We don't sanction merc presence on that colony, so whatever they're up to, can't be good. A flyby done by a drone over the docks where the mercs have rented out, shows that they're moving a plane of unknown origin. Several analysts I trust believe that, that plane is UNSC made."

Of course, there were analysts that went with Shepard down into the UNSC bunker; no doubt they were people loyal to Hackett.

"So what do you need me to do?"

"You and One-one-seven are to infiltrate the port area under control of Eclipse and retrieve that craft. Intel says that the bird has direct energy weapons and other technology that we don't want falling into the wrong hands. If Cerberus or anyone else gets that plane, we could be in over our heads. Right now, I'm busy covering up a few things so that the Council won't be giving Anderson a hard time. Deployment of Alliance Units will make the populace get jumpy and our merc friends might leave before we get the chance to act. But you won't be on your own, I have a couple of agents at the docks, who will cut surveillance for you, I'd have them take the Dropship but I'm afraid that'll destroy the trust between us and One-one-seven."

"Got it. Anything else you got on the bird?"

"Yes, I'm sending you the pictures and Intel on this op now."

"Okay, I'll get onto this asap."

"You'll be operating in an urban environment that won't be used to fully geared soldiers; I suggest you wear something less conspicuous."

"Such as?" Shepard asked.

"Your ceremonial uniform should do the trick; it'll help you get

around without question. I'll send you warrants and papers to help you get past things, but I want this op kept on a down low, so kill as little people as you can. Good luck Shepard, out." The link was then disconnected.

"Looks like the Chief's story is becoming more believable," Shepard muttered to herself as she took off her clothes and took a quick shower.

She let the warm water cascade down her body as she detached herself from the moment before having to jump right back in. After two minutes of bliss, Jane shut the water off and stepped out of the shower. She quickly reached for a towel and wrapped it around her body before heading out. Jane sat herself down on her bed and held her holopad and looked at the photos of the plane. It was long, sleek and beautiful, and had four engines on it, two large thrusters at the end of the main wings, and two smaller engines at the tail.

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Shepard stood at _Normandy_'s bridge in her H.S.A. Dress Uniform. After taking a quick glance of things and checking up with Kelly, Jane headed over to Joker.

"Hey Commander, what's up?" he always asked as his chair swivelled around.

"Just checking up on things, how are you?"

"So far so good, though I feel like EDI is trying to horn in on my work though."

"I am simply offering my services to aid you with tasks that you do not need to worry about," interjected EDI.

"You two, be nice," said Shepard, showing her maternal side.

"You know, you'd make a great mother," smirked Joker, "dibs being the awesome uncle."

Shepard rolled her eyes.

"But in all seriousness, I do like the Chief, nice guy. Very polite. You know, I thought he would be like Grunt or some other loose cannons around here, but he's quite. He's like my polar opposite."

"Good to know you're not hostile to him," smiled Shepard, "anyway, I need you to plot a course to Eden Prime; Hackett has got a mission for me and the Chief."

"Copy that Commander, is that why you're all dressed up?" Joker asked suggestively.

Shepard just sighed and walked back to the control room. And next to the holomap, stood the Chief in his armour and his helmet tucked under his arm.

"You called?" he asked in his deep voice.

"Hackett has a mission for us; he says that you can help out. It seems that Eclipse mercs are carrying out an op on Eden Prime, as you know merc presences on Eden Prime is strictly prohibited unless they have warrant. But in this case, they don't. From the Intel that has been gathered, the mercs are undercover and trying to smuggle out a plane." Shepard said as she handed John the holopad that contained images of the plane.

John instantly recognised the craft. It is the UNSC Osprey Dropship, which had replaced the UNSC Pelican Dropship after the discovery of the Forerunner Archives. A combination of UNSC innovation and Forerunner technology had produced excellent outcomes, some were upgrades to vehicles, and others were replacements. The Osprey had three bay doors, allowing faster dismount during combat situations and its passengers to rappel down, thus reducing the aircraft's exposure to AA fire. The Dropship also possessed active shields, anti-missile system, and enough armaments to level a building. The AGMs, plasma missile pods, and DEW Gatling guns made the Osprey versatile enough to participate in assaults and support roles without the need for escorts.

"It's a UNSC Osprey Dropship, the workhorse of the UNSC Armed Forces. It has energy shields, anti-missile capabilities and DEWs."

"Impressive. Anyway, Hackett wants us to retrieve that bird and keep the operation on a down low. He doesn't want the technology of the Osprey in the wrong hands."

John agreed with the statement, though he couldn't help but wonder what happens when he gets the Dropship back. It was possible that H.S.A. would want to horde the technology in the Osprey for themselves. To the Spartan, they weren't UNSC, so if they wanted to get their hands on the Osprey, protocol dictated that the Chief would be forced to destroy it.

"We'll be operating in a civvie environment so you need to wear something less conspicuous than your armour. A tall man in a ton of armour is conspicuous enough."

"Well what should I wear?"

"Hackett suggested military dress uniform, as it would help us move in quickly without question. Only problem is, all of mine are tailored for me."

"That would be problematic."

"Not to worry, the Normandy has a suit making machine, it's on the second level. If you have the plans for your desired clothes, the machine should be able to make it for you."

"Sounds good, I'll order the dress uniform I normally wear."

"I don't see why not."

If the Spartan chose to wear his own Dress Uniform, that would be his own choice, wearing a Systems Alliance uniform when not enlisted is punishable as death for it could be seen as espionage. No doubt some

disgruntled top brass would try to pull something like that. Having John wear his own clothing would avert any unwanted attention away from the Alliance.

And with that, John headed off.

"He seems to be more open now," said Kelly who was observing nearby.

"It would be nice to see him relax," quipped Shepard, "whatever he went through to make him the way he is, must've been bad."

"He may never fully recover, but I'm sure you'll bring him as close to normal can be," said Kelly.

Jane watched as John walked out of the bridge, she noticed how he gave way to Miranda who was walking, a gentlemen like gesture.

"Shepard," Miranda said politely, "can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure."

The two women moved to the back of the bridge well out of earshot from the other crew members.

"Once again Shepard, I'd like to thank you for helping me save my sister," Miranda whispered.

"Glad I could help."

"I also would like to ask you about the Chief," Miranda cleared her throat, "I was wondering if we could rely on him? If we could trust him?"

"What are you saying Miranda? The Chief's a good soldier and I'll take all the help I can get."

"You dug him out of the ground. In a bunker that doesn't match anything in our databases."

"Similar case with Grunt."

"I know, but Grunt just fights for the hell of it, he follows you because he respects you," said Miranda, hitting the nail dead in the head, "the Chief, is a Commander, his last name is a serial code or he doesn't want us to know, what does that say? He's bigger than the average male and his skin is unnaturally pale which means he spends a great deal in that armour. We know next to nothing about his past or how he was made, and he's smarter than Grunt by far."

"Cut to the chase Miranda."

"How do we know what he fights for? How do we know if he's loyal to us? He's a Commander, and if he's lying then it's a damn smart lie. How do we know he's not going to backstab us? I know he was with us when we went to save my sister!"

"He also killed the most men, more than us combined," interjected

Shepard.

"Exactly, but what stake does he have in us? He's a soldier without purpose, he's a black ops soldier, and those two aren't the greatest mix."

"I understand you concern Miranda, but we dug him up on Earth, evidence shows that he was there for a helluva long time, which means he's from the same place we come from. He's shown little emotion because he probably has forgotten how to, whatever war he was in, it was bad. I intend to ask him about it someday when we have a moment to rest. When we first pulled him out, I could tell that he was bewildered, that's something you can't fake."

"I'm not questioning his legitimacy; I'm questioning his history and motives."

"His motives? He wants to go home Miranda. His history? His life is a rough one."

"Which leads me to my next concern Shepard. What happened to humanity a thousand years ago? Who are the UNSC?"

"I don't know, but their technology is something that far surpasses ours. We'll need their help against the Reapers."

"Shepard, I trust your judgement, but be careful with the Chief."

"Miranda, we have a psychopathic convict with biotics living in engineering, and a Drell Assassin close in life support, what's the worst that could happen with the Chief?"

"I could image a lot of bad things."

"Miranda," Shepard spoke once more to calm down the Cerberus Operative, "he is a disciplined soldier who fights by military doctrine, he's not a loose cannon."

"I'd feel better if we knew if his first name," Lawson frowned.

"I'd rather not press him."

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An hour or so later, John returned. His new attire caused some of the crew to turn their heads. And as Shepard looked away from her messages, she could see why. The Spartan's Dress Uniform wasâ€| beautiful. Jane also noticed the two M7SCs and a long cylindrical object attached to the side of his thighs.

The uniform John wore, was exclusively for SPARTAN-IIIs. It was a black suit, with a standing collar and a tie. Chrome buttons, black gloves and a black belt that lay on the middle and two parallel silver strips that ran down the left side of the blazer. In his left hand, he cradled a UNSC Officer's hat, which had a white top, and the UNSC emblem in the front centre.

"You dress up nicely Chief," commented Shepard.

"Thanks. But I feel naked."

True, many UNSC personnel who wore armour felt exposed without it. Hell, the Chief had seen Spartans and Tier One operatives who would rather sleep in their armour rather than their bunks. Armour made people feel safe, and that is where John would feel safe, in his armour. But he remembered what Mendez said so long ago. _"Technology and armour are expendable, don't rely on them too much or you won't get far without them."_ Every ounce of that statement was true. Tier One operatives were normally deployed in civilian garbs before putting their armour on. John remembered his first deployment was like that, but back then, he didn't have the MJOLNIR armour. Just a BDU.

Shepard too understood the feeling, though she didn't fully comprehend it. Tali's dependency on her suit gave Jane a rough idea.

"Okay, follow me to the armoury so we can get geared up."

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"Even the armoury looks more luxurious than my quarters on a UNSC ship," John commented as he entered.

"Your designers must turn a blind eye on comfort," chuckled Shepard.

The two walked up to Jacob, who then turned to face them.

"Hello Commander, how can I help you?"

"Well, the Chief and I are going to be deployed in an urban environment on Eden Prime; we could use a couple of inconspicuous gear to help us."

"I got just the things," said Jacob as he opened a few cabinets and retrieved two COM sets, Kinetic Barrier generators and an Omni-tool.

Shepard and John promptly attached their gears and tested them.

"Systems are green," John said.

"Same here," added Shepard.

"And before I forget," John said, "you need to take this, it's a stealth op." The Spartan had un-holstered an M7SC plus a couple of mags to Shepard.

"Thanks."

"Chief, do you have an Omni-tool?" asked Jacob.

"Don't need one," replied the Spartan as he pulled up his left sleeve to reveal a tacpad.

"Looks like you two will be fine," said Jacob, "anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes," answered John as he pulled out a round for the M7SC, "see if you can make some more of these rounds."

The Spartan handed Jacob the bullet, who in turn examined it.

"Shouldn't be a problem."

"Alright, that'll be all Mr Taylor," said Shepard.

"Ma'am, sir," the man saluted before returning back to his work.

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****Eden Prime, High Orbit****

"Alright Chief, the Normandy will stay at the spaceport while we go groundside. ETA to our objective 3 hours," said Shepard.

Standard protocol applied to all ships that arrived at an Alliance held planet. Vessels that are incapable of atmospheric entry are to dock at an orbiting spaceport. Evidently Colonial Administration and Alliance High Command didn't want a ship orbiting a planet unchecked.

Looking at the window of the shuttle, John instantly recognised the planet, but not by its new name, rather than its previous name, Reach. The Spartan smiled, he was looking down upon his home again, it looked pristine and undamaged by war. But he was also aware of previous events surrounding it, specifically Shepard's earlier mission and the events leading up to her induction in becoming a Spectre.

The shuttle shook lightly as it descended through the atmosphere, the whirring sound of the engine resounded through the cabin as the craft slowed its descent. Eventually it touched down on a landing pad, and the doors hissed open. As John and Shepard stepped out of the vehicle, the two were greeted by the sight of a noon skyline dominated by skyscrapers, with bustling life and civilians going on their daily business. The climate however was a little warm

"Welcome to Eden Prime, Chief."

"Nice place," the Spartan commented.

The walk was fairly peaceful, of course there were passer-by who threw glances at John, but most of them had work that they needed to be getting on with and didn't tarry for longer than necessary. To the Spartan's left was a beautiful beach, where there were a number of people swimming, spending time with family, or just there for a tan. They looked like they were at peace and having fun, which sadly, was something John never experienced. Most of the time, the Spartan would be fighting for days on end, or in cyrostatics, and when he was sleeping, it would be plagued with nightmares.

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Shepard noticed how John walked, he didn't have this buff style of

walk with his shoulders out and a slight sway. His walk would be more defined like a march with purpose; his arms swayed slightly, his shoulders relaxed and still, and perfect posture. It was the walk of a soldier who'd just seen and lost far too much for one lifetime, yet still held together by a purpose. Jane wasn't too sure what purpose or what reason had kept the Spartan fully functional for so long, maybe it was training that had drilled him to be like the way he is, or a sense of compassion to fight on since there was no one else to do it.

His walk gave an eerie sense, it seemed almost robotic. Hell, she would've believed that he was a robot if she never saw his face.

Jane decided to leave those thoughts for later and looked over the beach. Life continued on peacefully and there were now little signs left of the Geth attack a few years back.

"Would be nice to raise a family here," Shepard commented as she saw a mother cradle her three year old child in her arms. The image always reminded her of what she fought for, she didn't fight for the backstabbing politicians, she fought for families going about their lives, she fought for normality.

"I grew up here," said the Spartan.

"What do you fight for?" Jane suddenly asked, "oh sorry, Chief."

"Well why do you ask?"

"See that mother over there?" Shepard said as she pointed towards the beach.

John nodded.

"Well, I fight for them, so that the mother and her child can sleep easy at night. I was wondering why you fight."

"To be honest, I fight for the men and women next to me. I fight because that was what I've been trained to do, what I've been ordered to do," the Spartan answered.

It was that short answer that gave Shepard a greater insight into John's mentality and his past. But it raised more questions than it answered. After a few more minutes of walking, the two arrived at the western entrance of the docks. The entire area was surrounded by a concrete wall, with surveillance installed. The Spartan also guessed that the small domes placed at every interval were AA emplacements. There was a building next to the checkpoint, and a tall control tower a two hundred metres behind the entrance. Surrounding the tower were cranes, a maze of shipping containers and workers moving back and forth.

A couple of security guards stood at the gates, milling about and drinking coffee, the Spartan deducted that they weren't Eclipse, and that the mercs would be further in the docklands.

"Lots of civilian workers at the docks, watch your fire," whispered John.

"I guessed as much, we'll talk our way through," said Shepard, "if that doesn't work, we'll shoot our way through. But we don't want to cause a panic, the Geth attack still have these people afraid."

****XXxxXX****

****DOCKS****

Grace Ryan sat at the security checkpoint drinking coffee with her co-workers. She hated working the noon shift, since she had to endure the vulgar comments and the general arrogance of the men who worked there. For the first week the men wouldn't stop hitting on her, but one idiot took it to far and then before the other men could react, Grace had effectively took away the man's ability to have any more kids. After that the men backed off. Grace much preferred working the afternoon shift when the other men and women she worked with were more polite, and it was always nice talking to them. But today, Grace felt like it was going to be a long one, especially when an attractive Alliance Commander and an unbelievable big and tall man in a black military uniform turned up. The Alliance Commander looked familiar to Grace, her high cheekbone face and Brunette hair that fell to her shoulders was something unforgettable. The man standing next to her was pale and well over six foot tall; his cobalt eyes seemed like they could look through anyone, to Grace, he was oddly attractive yet fearsome. Everything about him, from the way he moved to the uniform he wore spoke of raw power, precision and authority. It definitely looked like it was going to be a long day.

Many Alliance officers pass through the western dock checkpoint on a weekly basis, so it wasn't a big issue when one turned up, but Grace had never seen the black uniform the man wore. It was most likely a new division of the Alliance.

"Hey check out hottie over there," said Sam.

"I'd tap that," quipped Frank, "love me a girl in uniform."

"Guys," sighed Grace, "I'm standing right here."

"Hey, a chick's a chick," laughed Sam, "wonder how that babe got to be an N-Seven Commander."

"Probably did some _errands_ for the brass," hollered James.

The others laughed and gave each other a round of high-fives. Grace just rolled her eyes and sighed as she walked out of the booth and in front of the gate to meet the two newcomers.

"Hi," the woman said politely.

Grace noticed that the Alliance Commander's walk was much more relaxed yet still had the same confidence as her male counterpart.

"Hello," Grace answered back.

"We're here to check up on a few things," the woman.

"Sure, do you have warrant and ID?" Grace asked, it was standard protocol.

The woman handed Grace a holopad. The warrant checked out as she crossed referenced it with security records. They two were here for a routine check up on supplies and cargo manifest for Alliance soldiers. Whatever the cargo was, it had to be precious. Otherwise the Alliance Command wouldn't be sending an N7 Marine and a man who could rip anyone apart with his bare hands. As Grace checked the woman's ID, her mouth dropped a little.

"Oh my god," she muttered, "you're Commander Shepard."

"In the flesh," Shepard said warmly.

"Well everything checks out," Grace said, still in awe of being in the presence of a living legend, "come on in."

Ryan entered a few keys on her Omni-tool which prompted the gate to open. Immediately Shepard and her counterpart walked through.

Upon returning to the checkpoint building, Grace was bombarded with questions.

"Who's the chick then?" asked Sam as he munched on a donut.

"Commander Shepard," Grace smiled.

Frank immediately choked and spat out his coffee.

"No fucking way!" he said.

"Well who's the big guy?" asked Sam, "looked like one hardass."

"I don't know, but I wouldn't want to test him," Grace answered.

"Whoever he is, no human gets that big, not without drugs."

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"That was easy," said Shepard.

"Now the hard part," added John, "infiltrating the Eclipse held area. We need to head over to the control tower first, find out when the mercs are leaving and see if we can stop them."

"And how are we going to do that? Warrant only says we're here to check up on a few things."

"Use your Spectre status."

The two strode through the port, and being cautious at not moving at a too far of pace and making it look like they were there for observation, lest they wanted to stir up some unwanted attention.

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Upon arrival of the Eclipse held area, John quickly scanned his surroundings. Shipping containers were stacked to form a medieval style citadel defence formation. The enemy definitely had an advantage of elevation and numbers. There was also the fact of blind spots too, if some mercenary was to stand near the edge where he would be exposed, what's to say that there isn't another behind him out of view?

"Looks like we've hit a snag," John muttered.

"Intel didn't show us this," whispered Shepard, "Eclipse must've moved these crates recently."

John began to cycle through what options he had until he heard the sound of footsteps looking towards them. The Spartan looked up to see a Customs Agent walking towards him and Shepard. The Agent was Shepard's height; he had strong features, blue eyes and black hair, and he didn't look much older than twenty-five. His walk was nearly as disciplined as the Chief.

"I bet this guy works for Hackett," said Jane.

"I was expecting you two," the Agent said, "I'm Lieutenant Shane Dars, Alliance Intelligence."

"Nice to meet you," replied Jane.

"The Eclipse had just rearranged the crates into a citadel formation last night," Dars said, "You've got three tiers of walls to move through. Ten men on each level, and about thirty on the ground, that's about sixty mercs your up against, before reinforcements arrive, which would be twenty fully armed mercs, four of them engineers and one commander."

Judging from the way he spoke and the way he moved, Shepard had no doubt he came from a good school and did well in the Alliance Intelligence.

"Sounds like we've got a tough fight on our hands," said Shepard.

"Not unless we move quickly," said John.

"I climbed the crane one hundred metres away from here to take a snapshot of the area," the young Lieutenant said as he handed Shepard a holopad containing the images.

Jane took a quick look at the photos before handing them to the Spartan, who then began to formulate a strategy.

"We need a distraction," said John, "we're on the wrong end of firepower and there are too many civilians here."

"I've got that covered sir," answered Dars, "there's a fuel dump three-hundred metres north from here. I've rigged them with a small charge. When detonated, our guys in the tower will initiate an evacuation. The civilians will no doubt move out, and the mercs will stay behind because that's what they're paid for."

"Anything else we should now?" Shepard asked.

"Most of the shipping containers here are empty; the Eclipse mercs have been using them as billets. They also claim that the package is just a model for some movie. I don't know if they have gained access into the plane yet but I doubt it, I've been a close eye on things here and not much has happened. The Eclipse's flight has been delayed some of my own men, but they report that the ships on its way here, so you have about two hours left."

"That's more than plenty," John said.

"Good, after I leave, wait five minutes and then detonate the charges, the civilians will be leaving for lunch break."

With that, the Lieutenant promptly left the area.

"Plan of attack, any ideas?" asked Jane

John held up the holopad and pointed out respective points.

"We'll position ourselves at the southern area. One minute before detonation, I will start climbing to gain an advantage in elevation. You stay on ground and flush them out, I'll keep you covered."

"Sounds good."

The two un-holstered the M7SCs and switched off their safeties. Shepard toggled between the hybrid sight settings and took up a firing stance as John moved to the lowest crate to prepare for his climb.

"On my mark," John whispered into his COM.

The Spartan propelled himself off the ground and grasped on the ledge with his left hand whilst wielding his weapon in his right.

Shepard saw him perform the move so quickly and swiftly that it was beyond human.

John then pulled himself up, and promptly shot three Eclipse troopers. Blood oozed out of their wounds as they fell without letting out a cry, a well placed headshot with a high calibre weapon always made the enemy go down without a word. Wearing civilian garbs had greatly reduced their protection, not that it would help that much against a coilgun, but John had to remind himself that he too had that vulnerability.

"Okay, move up, I got you covered."

Shepard shouldered her weapon and moved down the walkway.

"Hold up, got more hostiles up ahead," whispered John.

The Spartan took up a crouching stance and aimed down his sights; he toggled the zoom on his optics and zeroed in on his nearest target. He gave the trigger a squeeze, the trooper convulsed as three high velocity rounds slashed through his body before falling down. He then opened fire on the rest of the soldiers he could, that were on the

first wall level, before pulling leaping onto the second wall level. With the area clear, he quickly jumped up onto the third wall level.

Shepard saw how John moved, and was in awe when he cleared the first chasm over her head and landed on a platform higher than the one he was on. It was, graceful in her opinion.

John quickly scanned the third wall level, well the shipping containers. Ten targets, just like Dars said. The Spartan didn't miss a heartbeat as he swept from left to right gunning down the mercenaries. Every single round found their mark, the Eclipse troopers fell silently, their overalls drenched in their own blood. John ejected the spent mag and placed it into his pocket before slapping in a fresh one.

"Chief, talk to me," said Shepard, "where you at?"

"Finished clearing the third wall, the guys on second and first we'll take some time to find the bodies, probably five minutes. More than enough time."

Jane began to advance.

"John, I've got four guys around the corner."

"Copy, I got a bead on the furthest ones away. Take them out on my mark, three, two, one, mark."

Shepard swung around the corner and opened fire. The two mercs closest to her dropped like potato sacks and fell slumped against the crates with their blood splattered everywhere. The two further away dropped in an instant. Jane could see that the Spartan was fast, really fast, she couldn't tell who he had targeted first before blood began to ooze from their heads.

She was amazed at the little recoil the weapon had, and how silent it was, it only made a slight ticking sound.

"Hold up, ten more up ahead. Five are guarding the entrance to the Osprey, five foot mobiles more ten metres away from them. I'll blow the charges and hit the guys at the entrance, you take out the patrol."

"Got it."

John moved silently into position, he looked down at the five unsuspecting guards and unsheathed his combat knife. Shepard who was to his left was quickly moving through the maze of shipping containers and the patrol was heading back for another pass. The Spartan smiled inwardly, these Eclipse mercenaries were good in maintaining their cover. The patrol moved in a ragged formation carrying bags, as for the guards, they just loitered and smoked cigarettes or drank coffee. It left them even more vulnerable. John leapt off the third wall and came crashing down into the merc standing in the middle of the formation, he didn't even cry out, he didn't get the chance. He was dead before he even began to fall to the ground. The Spartan then swiftly slit the throats of the two men on his left. He then raised his when and fired a quick burst into the trooper on his right; the woman danced a deadly macabre before

dropping, and lying in a pool of her own blood. The last man raised his arms in anticipation of blocking the Spartans melee attack, but John was much faster, he slammed the blade into the man's skull, the trooper stopped as if someone had pulled the plug out on him. And right at that very moment, John detonated the fuel dumps.

Shepard's body flared, a blue mist surrounded her as she unleashed her biotic attack on the patrol, the men and women there were promptly thrown into the air before Jane slammed them down into the ground. As she turned to face John, she saw the Spartan shove his combat knife into a merc's skull. And a split second later, an explosion of thunderous force roared in the distance. Jane watched as the trooper's arm went limp before the blade was torn out of his head, and his body crashed to the floor.

And just like Dars had said, evacuation procedures were enacted. The alarms began to blare over the PA systems.

The sudden explosion caused the mercs standing around the Osprey to look at the column of smoke billowing upwards into the sky and the fully armed Eclipse Troopers to emerge from shipping containers and reveal themselves.

"I'll knock out the armoured guys, you take out those at the Osprey," said Shepard.

John nodded.

The two quickly sprang into action; John sprinted forward, adrenaline pumped through his veins and the world began to move in slow motion. He opened fire like an ODST who just got out of his Drop-pod, cutting down anyone within his sights. He was careful at selecting his targets so to not alert anymore mercenaries until he could focus on them. Upon arrival of the Osprey, the Spartan cleared the remaining guards. He turned around and saw Shepard finishing off an Eclipse Commander.

Jane used her biotics to lift the Commander into the air and slam the woman into a shipping container. John's enhanced hearing picked up the sound of the Eclipse Commander's bones snapping like twigs and her armour crushed like a tin can. Shepard finished her off by firing a short burst into her.

"Okay Shepard, we've got them distracted, haul it to the Osprey," barked John into the COM.

"On my way," replied Shepard as she sprinted towards the idle dropship.

John moved up to the rear hatch of the Osprey and held his hand up to the console. The screen flickered to life.

Scanningâ€|

Authenticatingâ€|

UNSC Personnel: Sierra-117 â€ Rank: Commander

Access Granted

The Spartan smiled, even after a thousand years the bird was still functional. Shepard quickly arrived and John opened the hatch, allowing Jane to enter first.

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The Dropship's interior was quite spacious, Jane looked around, there were crates, and lockers on the sides.

"Looks like this bird was made to ferry cargo," said John, "Shepard, I'm gonna need you to fly shotgun, we're not out of the woods yet."

"Coming Chief," said Shepard as she moved through the hold and into the cockpit.

She found the Spartan sitting in the pilot seat, running through the check-up sequence.

"Hydraulics functional, Ion Drives ready. Starting her up." John's fingers danced across the console as he flicked a few more switches and entered more commands. "Shepard, take control of the turrets, cycle through the cameras."

"Got it."

Jane strapped herself in and pressed the button labelled "Weapons Systems".

A holo-screen materialised in front of her, Jane selected the "DEW Turrets" and found herself looking through the port camera.

"Switch to rear camera," said John.

"Got it."

"Alright engines and sensors online and shields are up."

Jane felt a light vibration as the engines started spinning; she looked out of the windows and saw the main engines release a light blue hue, and the heat waves. She guessed that the Osprey's engines were designed to have a low heat-signature.

"Shepard, spin up those guns, we've got hostiles inbound."

The camera showed a couple of Eclipse mercenaries in varying attire taking up firing positions. The sound of the Osprey's engine flaring to life had grabbed their attention.

Jane felt the Osprey ascend. Eclipse troopers opened fire, their rounds bouncing off the Osprey's shields.

"Rake 'em up, Shepard."

Shepard trained the targeting reticule on the mercenaries, and squeezed the trigger on the joystick. She heard the electric discharge of the weapon as it spewed lances of blue beams at the troopers. Many of them fell to the weapon, most were burned and cut into smaller pieces, and the shipping containers around them were

turned into Swiss cheese, the Ion beams bore holes into everything it touched.

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The Spartan then gunned the thrusters and felt the Osprey lurch forward. The dropship quickly pulled away from the ground and into the sky.

"We're clear," John said as he checked the radar, "no one is after us, good."

Shepard took in a deep breath before exhaling and releasing the controls.

"Wow, these things pack a punch," she said, "and this is standard issue?"

"Yes. Remember that Gatling gun I bought with me?" John asked.

"Yes."

"It has the same firepower," he deadpanned.

"Damn."

****XXxxXX****

It was truly going to be a long day for Grace Ryan. One moment she was playing chess and sipping bubble tea with Alice, the next moment a thunderous roar shook through. Someone had blown up the fuel dumps; she could see the massive thick greyish black smoke column curling up into the warm blue sky. Next evacuation procedures were being enacted and people filed out.

Grace scanned through the crowd to see if she could spot Sheppard, but Ryans could not find the legendary Commander, or her huge companion. But she did see a customs officer look skyward, and followed his gaze. She saw a shuttle speed off into the sky.

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"Course set, ETA five hours," said John, "Apparently the Normandy is on the far side of the planet."

"What's in the crates?" asked Shepard as she jerked her thumb behind her.

The Spartan unbuckled his seatbelts and walked back into the hold. He turned to face a crate, and tapped in a few keys. The seals popped open with a twist, allowing the Spartan to lift off the lid.

"It's a weapon crate," said John.

One M2AMGSR, or Model 2 Anti-Material 9.5x40mm Gauss Sniper Rifle, with an extra 500 rounds, lay within the first container. The other containers held an assortment of weapons; weapon attachments, ammunition, and cell pack rechargers for the UNSC DEW arsenal.

M92A 10 gauge Shotgun, Designated Marksman 201 Enhance Battle Rifle (DM201 EBR), M702 LMG, SCAR, SCAR Carbine, M7SC, M2AMGSR, and the W/AV M7 G/GNR, colloquially known as the Spartan Laser, the weapons were all there in the crates. Except the crates were near empty so there wasn't an abundance of each weapon, not that John was complaining.

The W/AV M7 G/GNR is the replacement of the W/AV M6 G/GNR, unlike its predecessor the new Spartan Laser model had a battery cell that could fire up to ten rounds, which lasted longer, and a cobalt blue beam that is twice the power of the crimson red beam. The survival of the Coalition forces during the Coalition-Covenant War was due in no small part to the Spartan Laser. Many Coalition soldiers had logged hundreds and thousands of decisive kills with the weapon, making it one of the most feared by the Covenant.

Taking a quick glance at the cache, Shepard gave a low whistle.

"That's a lot of firepower there," she said in admiration.

John brushed the surface of an M702 LMG, a weapon that had greater firepower than the SCAR but less mobility. The last crate held some food supplies, biofoam and a smaller box. The Spartan picked up the smaller box with care, and opened it gently. It in, lay a wooden smoking pipe, and small packets.

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****The Ark, ONI Forbidden City â€" Facility 001****

Lieutenant Colonel Essingdon Keyes Sc.D., the son of Captain Jacob Keyes and Doctor Catherine Halsey, and the younger brother of Commander Miranda Keyes, sat in his office. Not his flashy window office that was for interviews and PR, but his work station office, located deep underground, where he coordinated multiple ONI Section-III Research and Development Projects, a position that fitted his level of genius intellect.

His office had the generic slightly curved reflective white walls, a large glazed glass desk with a powerful computer, and multiple wall mounted TV screens which would keep him updated on just about everything. In the background, his stereo played soft classical music, a trait he picked up from his mother.

He had short, neat jet black hair, blue eyes as a result of his Spartan-IV enhancements, strong features and a strong build. Essingdon would be considered attractive by many standards, but dating was something far from his mind.

Keyes opened his desk drawer and retrieved a wooden smoking pipe and a small packet labelled "pineapple". He poured a small amount into the pipe and then lighted the contents to get it going. The reaction was endothermic, the gas given off, was very cool, but not cold.

It was known as "Puffing", instead of inhaling tobacco â€" which would be harmful â€" the Puffer would inhale a substance similar to Bronchial Surfactant. The inhalant would replenish lost nutrients during combat and help keep the user awake and alert, and no harmful

effects. It was developed by Essingdon and Fhajad-084 during their free-time, the wooden pipe element, was inspired by Jacob Keyes and his grandfather's pipe. This proved useful to Officers working overtime, and didn't get the chance to eat, puffing would help keep them going a bit longer, but it wouldn't fill them up. So they couldn't always run purely on puffing.

The doors to his office parted open with a hiss, few dared to enter his office without knocking, and there was only one he knew in the vicinity who would just stroll in. The woman wore a lab coat and business attire pants, her jet black hair flowed freely to her shoulders, and her face was young and supple. Technically speaking, she's biologically in her sixties, but Keyes had brought her back from being clinically dead. The reviving process had made her look much younger, it was an unforeseen side-effect, but one that horrified Essingdon, yet pleased her greatly. His mother, Doctor Catherine Halsey looked young enough to be Essingdon's older sister.

"Hello sweetie," Halsey said, hugging her son from behind.

"Hi mum." Mum, he didn't say mom like Miranda. Essingdon was sent to a Grammar School that doubled as a Military Academy, it was where his accent-less English originated from.

"You know I met this delightful girl-" but before Halsey could continue, her son interrupted.

"Yes, I know she's a nice girl, and so on, but, well, I'm busy," Essingdon pouted.

"Dear, you've only been out of this facility once, and that was when you went to your best friend's wedding."

"Well its Edmund, I wouldn't leave him hanging for the world. But why do you want me to go out so much?"

"It's not healthy burning yourself out like that, go out and live life a little."

"Knowledge waits for no man, or woman."

"You're worse than I am," Halsey chuckled, "I found love when I was young, so did your father and your sister."

"Okay, okay," exclaimed Essingdon as he held his hands up as a sign of yielding to his mother's request. "I'm going."

The Lieutenant Colonel pulled himself up to his feet and glanced through the window, where he looked over the vast chamber filled with vats that contained Flood Spores in containment, and the walkways patrolled by sentinels. Should the sentinels fail to contain a Flood spore " though unlikely that event was " vents located around the chamber would blast flammable gas into the room and incinerate its contents.

"They'll still be here when you come back," his mother said, as she saw look out the window.

He then walked over to his coat hanger which was near the glazed door, and took of his lab coat and hung it neatly onto one of the

hooks. He then picked up his trenchcoat and held it neatly in his left arm, while he straightened his tie with the other. It was part of his meticulous personality. A trait that definitely did not originate from his mother, who usually left Styrofoam cups lying around in her office.

"Be sure to take Fhajad with you to lunch," said Halsey in her motherly tone.

Essingdon gave a polite nod before walking out of his office and into the clinically white hallways, with glass windows that provided overwatch into testing and storage chambers. He passed a multitude of armed guards and scientists on his way out, some of the scientists were testing the latest scanners, others were simply heading to the cafeteria for lunch.

"Sir," greeted Doctor Amanda Thorkais, warmly. The Doctor stood at 1.7m tall; she had green eyes and crimson red hair which she had tied into a pony tail. Amanda had beautiful skin, a high cheekbone face and a high forehead. By many standards, she would be very attractive.

"Doctor Thorkais, how can I help you?" asked Keyes in a friendly and professional manner.

"Have you seen you're mother around?"

"Yes, she's in my office."

"Also, Lord Admiral Hood wishes to see you at three PM tomorrow, he won't say why though."

"Okay, thank you."

The two parted ways. Keyes strode quickly to the elevator and entered. Debussy played over the elevator's speakers as it ascended to ground level. Essingdon was greeted by the sight of the interior of a large glass atrium, adorned with TV screens updating the staff on events. Many scientists and analysts walked in and out of the snowy weather, milling about their business. Many of the UNSC's greatest minds worked in this very facility. Forbidden City is three times the size of ONI Castle.

Essingdon walked briskly across the white marble floors and exited the atrium via the eastern exit, and into the undercover carpark, where his M14 "Warthog" FAV Civilian Variant lay. The M14 had superseded its predecessor, the M12 and the M13; because Keyes's report stated that the M12 and M13 lacked protection and capacity that would be sorely needed during combat. And that was where the M14 came in, it is bigger and heavier.

The new Warthog could now fit five occupants, and have room to carry supplies, the gunner would stand in the middle of the vehicle, rather than the back, so in case the soldier was killed, he or she would not fall off. Its main armament is the M888 HMG, of course the vehicle could be outfitted to carry different assortments of weapons, such as a mortar, or missile pods. Unlike its predecessors, the M14 is not prone to rolling, for the span between the wheels had been lengthened, providing more stability. However, that is not to say the M14 is without its drawbacks, its enclosed cabins and doors now made

it virtually near impossible for passengers to fire heavy weapons, leaving it vulnerable to enemy armour.

Nonetheless, the beautiful machine held up its predecessor's reputation of being tough and reliable.

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It was early autumn, the leaves had faded into a beautiful orange-yellow colour, but the days were still warm. Off in the distance from the Forbidden City was the commercial district, the towering skyscrapers could be seen. The young Keyes could see the other Halo rings, in the day sky, at night; the view was even far more impressive. Each arm of the Ark, and the Halo rings would become illuminated by settlements on the superstructures.

Essingdon drove down the highway; his sleek black hog cruised through the traffic smoothly.

The scientist then switched on his tacpad and entered in a few keys.

"_Calling Fhajad," _the device said.

"Lieutenant Commander Fhajad speaking," a man said.

"Hey Fhajad," greeted Keyes warmly, "want to go for lunch?"

"Sure, where should I meet you?" Fhajad replied in equal cheeriness.

"Remember that Italian restaurant we went to last time?"

"The one by Lake Wells in the Samson commercial district?"

"That's the one."

"Sounds good, I'll see you there in about thirty minutes."

"Okay, see you there."

The COM switched off.

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As Keyes entered the restaurant, his eyes scanned across the room, a trait he picked up during training at ONI. The venue had a tall ceiling, low hanging chandeliers, cream coloured walls and thin curtains. A few bankers and businessmen sat at certain tables, going about their own way. And a large table in the centre of the room sat eleven bureaucrats discussing what task needed to be handled next.

He found Fhajad waving to him at a table in the corner, by the window. Essingdon walked over and sat down at the table.

Fhajad was wearing his Spartan-II exclusive dress uniform, which had garnered many looks from the patrons. Keyes remembered when Fhajad was suffering heavily from Parkinson's disease, the Spartan was shaking uncontrollably in his wheelchair, but his mind was unharmed

and brilliant, which gave him a position in ONI. However Halsey and Essingdon saw that Fhajad's real talent was being wasted; the two scientists took the time to revive the wiped-out Spartan, during the brief period of peace, and their efforts were well rewarded, especially when the Covenant returned. Fhajad finally became a Spartan-II, his combat prowess saved countless lives during Earth's final days. He was also the one who prevented Halsey falling into the vacuum of space, when _Faith_ was gutted from stem to stern by a Covenant warship.

"Good to see you, old friend," smiled Fhajad.

"You too,"

A young waitress, who appeared to be in her late-teens to early twenties walked over to the table.

"Hello gentlemen, what would you like today?" she asked in a professional and gentle manner.

"I'll have the pene pasta and a glass of pineapple juice," Essingdon said.

"And I'll have a rare t-bone steak with mushroom sauce, and a glass of water," replied Fhajad.

"Certainly," the waitress said, and then quickly left.

Fhajad then leaned closer to the table. From his body language, Keyes immediately concluded that whatever the Spartan-II wanted to say, it would be important.

"We're going back in a month," the Spartan whispered.

"What, who decided this?" Essingdon asked.

"Top Brass, UEG and High Ranking Elites, it's time to go back and see what is left of Earth."

"We plastered every single major city, we scorched Earth, what makes you think there's anything back at Earth?"

"Not everyone made it out with us." Said Fhajad, "Not everyone would have been killed by the Hammer Down, there will be survivors."

"I don't think they'll be too happy to see us after what we've done."

"What are the odds that they'll remember us? It's been a thousand years. We're going back to see if we can help."

"I take it we're also going to try and establish contact with other species mentioned in the Archives?"

Fhajad nodded. "We can't stay out here forever, sooner or later, we need to go back and find a planet to live on."

Keyes sighed. "So who's going?"

"Vice Admiral Richard Lash will be taking us on the UNSC _Watchful

Eye_, a Stealth Cruiser that just came out of the docks. We'll be joined by Task Force Talon, three Delta teams, you, me and Cortana. The Elites will join us after they've surveyed their target areas."

Delta was a nickname for the Spartan-IVs.

"Alright, so why do I need to go?" asked Keyes, he wondered why they'd want a scientist from ONI Section III.

"You're the one who knows most about the Forerunner Archives, you're a tactical and analytical genius, why wouldn't they want you?"

"Point. So this is what Hood wants to talk about tomorrow?"

"Yes."

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5. Lair of the Shadow Broker: Part 1

****XXxxXX****

****The Ark, UNSC HIGHCOM****

Contrary to the popular belief that all Top Brass offices were located above ground overlooking some scenic view, all Top Brass offices were located deep underground or aboard warships, where they would be well defended and safe from any enemy incursions. Lord Admiral Terrance Hood was no exception. His office lay within the deep confines of a premade chamber which had been refurbished and redecorated. Two oak wood shelves stood on either side of the rooms, where they held models and files. At the back was Hood's desk, it too was of a deep maroon oak, and had slight curves. On his desk, sat three Holo-screens, keyboard and mouse, and other stationaries. In the centre of the room and in front of the desk were two cream coloured armchairs and a glass coffee table.

Keyes had only been in Hood's office twice, he found the room comforting and luxuries, in essence, it was far more human than Essingdon's clinically white and sterile office. The scientist and his Spartan companion walked across the white carpet floors before sitting down in the armchairs.

Hood promptly moved to his seat, and sat down.

"Before we begin, make yourselves comfortable," said the Admiral as he opened his desk drawer, and retrieved a wooden smoking pipe and a small bag that said "Strawberry flavour". Hood tipped the content into the pipe, lighted it, and started to inhale it in.

"I must commend you two for coming up with this," smiled Terrance, "handy, and classy."

Keyes and Fhajad made a curt nod, before pulling out their own pipes and poured in their own flavours, Essingdon's being pineapple, and Fhajad's being blackcurrent.

Keyes inhaled the pineapple flavoured stim, the flavour went down smoothly, and giving him a sorely needed boost. He took another quick puff before setting down the pipe.

Hood did the same; he gently placed his pipe on a stand, and began.

"Well gentlemen, UEG and Top Brass, have approved of a recon mission to Earth. You two have been selected to go, due to your combat and analytical skills."

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Essingdon, "but I'm not too sure why you would need me."

"I'm aware that you're one of ONI's greatest minds, but we don't have that many Combat Scientists on hand, and none of them have the same knowledge you possess on the Forerunner Archives." Hood said, and then paused. "We've been out here for a very long time; it's time to go back."

"What do you think we could be looking at, when we get back sir?" asked Fhadjad.

"Anything between nothing, to organized presence on Earth," answered Hood, "I'm hoping it's something in between."

"Are there any other recon missions?" asked Keyes.

"No, Earth is the main priority. If we don't hear anything from you after two weeks, I'll lead in the cavalry."

"So when are we leaving?"

"Thirty one days."

****XXxxXX****

NORMANDY SR-2****

John sat in the hold of the Osprey, and took a long puff from his pipe. He leaned back into the chair as he tasted the flavour of watermelon. He was one more step closer to home, yet still so far away. The Spartan picked up his helmet and placed it on the floor so that he could inspect the weapons. All of them were in good order, but he wouldn't need to use most of them, due to the fact that the SCAR was pretty much an all-rounder weapon.

The Chief, then picked up the DM201 EBR, it was one metre in length, and bore a similar resemblance to the 21st Century sniper rifle R11 RSASS. The Semi-automatic Gauss rifle with an inbuilt silencer, fired 9mm Armour piercing rounds, which could stop a beserking Brute dead with one hit, this made the rifle a favourite amongst sniper-teams, overwatchers, marksmen, officers and Delta Operatives.

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Shepard sat in her quarters; she had just woken up from a seven hour sleep, and wasn't prepared to leave her room just yet. Jane had, had trouble sleeping ever since she had been revived by Cerberus, Kelly

her confidant had said that Shepard was suffering from insomnia due to stress. And that was true, Jane was on a mission from stopping the Reaper invasion, without backing from the Citadel Council or the Alliance, but of the terrorist organisation, Cerberus. Things really couldn't get more stressful than that. The galaxy viewed her as an untouchable warrior, an Angel, who carried death or salvation on her wings. Some believed that she had gone mad, others didn't really care, but truth be told, not many believed her about the Reaper threat. And propaganda helped keep the number of her supporters low.

It made her wonder about her team, all of them fought beside her out of loyalty and respect, all of them, except for John. Then again, he was just there for the ride, just like Grunt, but he didn't exhibit aggression like the Krogan. No, John was disciplined, self-controlled and precise. He didn't have that desire to fight; it was more like he just fought because it needed to be done.

A knock on her cabin door, brought Shepard out of her thoughts.

"Come in," she said.

In walked Kelly Chambers, who had that air of serenity around her. Jane smiled, Kelly was like a sister to her, and they often saw things eye to eye. The young Yeoman was universally loved aboard the Normandy for her gentle nature and kindness. This moment was no exception as she carried Shepard's breakfast.

"Brooding again Commander?" smirked Chambers as she set down the meal on the nightstand.

"I told you, when off duty, it's just Jane," smiled Shepard, "and yes, I was brooding."

"Well, it looks like you got enough sleep this time," Kelly said as she sat down on Shepard's bed.

"Seven hours," Shepard confirmed.

"That's good," Kelly beamed, "anyway, I have to ask, but, how'd the mission with John go?"

"Surprisingly easy," smiled Jane, "most of the time, he was walking me through what to do."

"Sounds like you enjoyed it."

"I miss working with soldiers."

"Of course, you're soldiers are mentally conditioned to allow optimal efficiency. Anyway, eat up, or you're cereal will get soggy," Kelly said as she handed Shepard a bowl of chocolate flakes and milk.

"Also, you have unread messages at your terminal."

"I'll look into it, once we've finished." She smiled.

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After finishing breakfast, Kelly took the dishes, left the room and

went back to her duties.

Shepard took a quick shower, and changed into her regular fatigues. She then sat down at her desk and opened her email.

Jane quickly read the message; it was refering to Liara T'soni hunting the Shadow Broker. It continued to say that Cerberus had recently uncovered intel about the whereabouts of the Shadow Broker's base of operations, and had given it to the Asari. But Liara didn't have much faith in Cerberus, which in turn, the Illusive Man had requested the Shepard go and meet T'soni, as a gesture of good faith.

Shepard switched on the COM, and spoke

"Joker, set course for Illium."

"Copy that Commander."

After the quick message, Shepard went to the Hangar bay to check up on John. As she entered, the strong smell of coolant and oil nearly overwhelmed her. At one end, was the shuttle, and at the other, was the Osprey. The Osprey certainly did look menacing compared to the Shuttle. It just sat there like a predator brimming with guns. If this was the UNSC standard dropship, she'd love to see what a gunship would look like.

Jane strolled over to the Osprey's hold, and found that the door was open. She peered in to see the Spartan, smoking a wooden pipe, and checking the weapons.

"Didn't know you smoked John," she said.

"It's not smoking, it's puffing."

Shepard walked into the hold and sat down, opposite the Spartan, a sweet smelling scent of watermelon welcomed her, and drowned out the smell of engine fluids.

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"I'm not inhaling tobacco."

Jane tilted her head slightly.

"Are you inhaling stims?"

The Spartan nodded, "something like that, no harmful effects."

"Alright. But anyway, we're going to Illium, wanted to see if you wanted to tag along."

"Sure, what are we up against."

"Urban environment, and since we're going after the largest information broker, we're probably going to go up against a well-armed, well trained personal army."

"Okay."

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****Illium****

The Normandy never left Illium's orbit, a quick shuttle ride, John, Shepard and Garrus were back at the trading area.

The sky had faded into a purple colour, signalling sunrise. John had witnessed countless sunrises, yet few as beautiful as Illium's, normally, sunrises symbolised that the night has gone, the danger has passed, and safety will reign. But modern warfare was totally different, daylight just meant you're enemies are going to gear up for something big, maybe a rush offensive. So in truth, the emotional value of watching a relatively peaceful sunrise was lost on him. Ironically, the Spartan's experiences taught him that the more beautiful the sunrise, the greater the hell that the day will bring. With that in mind, John snapped back into full alert and methodically swept the environment for any hostiles.

"Illium," said Garrus, "beautiful, regulated and safe— well that's what it appears to be on the surface. But in every alley, at every wrong move, it's just as dangerous as Omega. You can think of Illium as Omega with contracts and expensive shoes."

The Spartan steadily scanned the landscape, comparing the new scenery to the last. Not much had changed at all.

"Any place with bustling economic activity and tourism is just Omega in a different form," said Jane, "Except here on Illium, you don't need to worry about getting caught in cross-fires between Mercs and gangs. Come on, Liara's office is this way."

John followed Shepard up a flight of stairs and into an office with a wide view of the metropolitan area. Of course it wasn't as dense as the cities of the UNSC/UEG, and there was far too much air traffic than the UEG would authorise. Flying cars posed hundreds of security and safety risks. Considering of what the Spartan had gathered of T'soni's reputation and current occupation, her current office location wasn't the safest.

"Shepard," the Asari greeted, "it's good to see you again."

"I know you're looking for the Shadow Broker," Jane said, cutting to the chase, as she brushed aside a lock of her brown hair, "Cerberus gave me data on where to find him, you interested?"

"Absolutley," said Liara, with a hint of elation, but all of it quickly evaporated as she continued. "I had no idea, let me see what you've got."

Shepard handed the Asari scientist a datapad. Liara entered in a few keys and a video then played. It had a Salarian wearing yellow armour.

"It looks like a leak transmission between Shadow Broker operatives and the location of—" Liara stopped as she saw a picture of a Drell, named Feron. "It's about Feron, he's still alive!" A small smile spread across her dark purple lips.

"Your friend?" asked Shepard, "the one who recovered my body from the Shadow Broker?"

"The same," said Liara with a small tone of sadness, "he sacrificed his life to save me. I'd never found anything suggesting he was still alive."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I need to go and get prepared, come by my apartment later."

Shepard watched as Liara walked out of her office, she could tell that the Asari was overwhelmed with this newfound information.

"I've been planning revenge for two years, and now I can make it a rescue," T'soni breathed. The doors hissed opened, and the Asari left.

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****ILLIUM, Liara's apartment****

"What's going on?" asked Shepard.

Liara's apartment looked like an assassination crime scene. There were bullet holes in a window panel, shattered glass littered the metal flooring, and off in some corner, a light with a blue hue flickered.

"This area is sealed off," answered an Asari officer, who moved to block the group, "please step back ma'am."

"Sealed off? Why?" Jane asked, with genuine concern.

"Someone tried to kill your friend Commander Shepard," answered another, descending the stairs, the Asari was wearing blue armour, and her face was adorned with orange-yellow facial markings. "Thank you officer, you're people are dismissed."

Shepard, Garrus and John walked past the holo-tape and towards the Asari.

"You can't do that," argued the Officer.

"Already done," the Asari rebutted.

Other officers switched off their equipment and filed out of the apartment swiftly.

"Tela Vasir, Special Tactics and Recon."

"A Spectre?" asked Shepard, puzzled by why another would be here.

"I heard your status was reinstated, good," said Vasir warmly, "you're one of our most famous operatives. Might even get you to sign my chestplate. So I assume you had business with your friend this evening Commander?"

"Liara was following a lead on the Shadow Broker," answered Shepard.

"The Shadow Broker? Dangerous enemy to have."

"What are the facts so far?"

"About twenty five minutes ago, someone took a shot at T'Soni. Note the bullet holes. She stuck around for another four minutes before leaving the building."

John took note of the water seeping through the bullet holes because of the rain.

"Hanging around with a killer still in play," pondered Garrus, "whatever Liara was up to, must've been big to risk her neck like that."

"Liara isn't here, where is she?" asked Shepard.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be sifting through her crap."

John instantly noted the sudden aggression in language. In his experience, ONI and Delta Operatives refrained from unnecessary aggression. This current scenario, he couldn't picture why Vasir, a Spectre would say 'crap'. But the Spartan wasn't the only one who had picked that up, he saw Shepard's expression, revealing that she was thinking the same thing.

"There's no blood, no body," she continued, "looks like T'Soni got away."

This time, Vasir sounded slightly disappointed, especially about the part that Liara got away. John hoped that Shepard was picking up on this too.

"The sniper didn't plan on her kinetic barrier, clever girl, but paranoid."

"Did the police find anything when they arrived?" asked Shepard.

"Just the mess and the bullet holes. I gave them a gold star for finding the bullet holes."

"Liara was expecting me; she would've left a message here. Her office wasn't safe."

"I'm not surprised, Illium is just Omega with expensive shoes," Vasir said as she crossed her arms across her chest, "I haven't found anything useful to track her down. You knew T'Soni better than I do, where would she have hidden her back-ups?"

"Let me take a look around."

A quick search through the apartment's Prothean dÃ©cor led Shepard to a cabinet. As she approached it, a secret compartment hissed open, revealing a data disk with a glowing red ring at its edge. Jane picked up the disc gently and examined it.

"Vasir, I've got something here."

"Back-up disk, let's try it on her terminal."

Jane gently placed the disk onto the terminal. The many orange displays flickered, before a Salarian finally appeared on screen.

"Looks like she recorded a call," Vasir commented.

"_What have you got for me Sekat?" said Liara._

"_It was tricky, but you paid for the best," the Salarian answered, "I can narrow it down to a cluster, may be even a system."_

"_How soon can you have it?"_

"_Shouldn't take long, come to my office, Baria Frontiers in the Dracon Trade Centres. Got to say though T'Soni, you're making me a little nervous, how big is the trouble that could come out of this?"_

"_Relax Sekat," reassured Liara, "I'll see you in a few hours."_

"This must be important," said Shepard, "the Shadow Broker's people already tried to kill her once."

"I know where the Dracon Trade Centre is, my car's outside."

"Let's go."

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The Skycar hummed through the air, before finally being settled down on a landing pad by Vasir. The team then quickly disembarked and prepared to move on Shepard's orders.

Instinctively, John moved in front of Shepard and scanned the night landscape. Training always dictated that the one with the most defensive capabilities take point.

"The Baria Frontiers' offices are located on the third floor. I don't hear police chatter, we might've missed the party already," said Vaisr as she ascended the stairs.

Shepard was about to speak, when a thunderous explosion shook the ground. Without wasting a second, John moved to shield her from any oncoming debris.

"Liara's in there!" Jane yelled.

More explosions ripped through the building in succession, consuming multiple floors in a firestorm. The Spartan heard the sound of glass shatter, and metal screech as it was sent crashing down.

A couple of the larger chunks of the debris bounced and shattered on the Spartan's shields. Then the shockwave washed over him, further draining his shields. He watched Garrus and Vasir be thrown back like ragdolls, the Turian had a close call when a sizeable chunk of

concrete narrowly missed his head before landing at the bottom of the stairs with a resounding thud, almost damaging Vasir's car.

John then turned around, quickly unslung his rifle, and swept the area. He could hear the screaming civilians, and the wounded pulling themselves across the shattered glass, desperate to get to safety. In torn sections of the building, the Spartan could see the hungry flames lick and burn through electrical devices and clothing of the dead or dying.

"They just took out three floors to make sure she's dead. I'll grab the skycar and seal off the building from the top," yelled Vasir. She then turned around and sprinted to the landing pad.

Jane nodded, and then shouldered her Mattock.

"I'll start down here and work my way up."

"Just leave some for me," yelled Vasir as the skycar's doors closed. The vehicles engines then whirled and took off.

"Let's go," Shepard indicated by jerking her thumb towards the building, and unslung her rifle.

****XXxxXX****

****THE ARK, FORBIDDEN CITY****

Essingdon sat in his office, his long slender pianist fingers danced across the keyboard as he filled in reports and read articles, in the Forerunner Archives. Reading through the Archives' entries was Essingdon's favourite past-time activity. Especially after an eventful run in with Admiral Margaret Orlanda Parangosky, who is the Head of ONI, he needed to unwind a bit. Her ability to make Keyes' life a pain never ceases to amaze him. Every time they meet, she has something else to complain about. Today, she wanted him to begin a project which would turn the Flood into a bio-weapon that could be controlled by humans.

Crazy woman, you can't control the Flood. Keyes was well aware of earlier experiments on the Flood; obviously they didn't go down nicely. The scientist had dedicated many years in finding a way to destroy the Flood efficiently without harming other life forms, and now Parangosky wants to take it in a totally different direction. The scientist would gladly shoot the bloated irrational shrivelled hag without a moment's hesitation. He was pretty sure other many other members of the UNSC Security Committee felt the same, Parangosky had made plenty of enemies during her time, how she became the director of ONI, Keyes would never know, what perplexed him even more was how she managed to keep her job for so long.

The young scientist leaned back into the arm chair and rang his fingers through his jet black hair.

"Rough day?" asked Cortana as her avatar appeared on a nearby pedestal.

Keyes nodded lightly.

"Don't worry, she can't touch you," the AI smiled warmly, but then

quipped, "I won't let that happen to my baby."

Keyes bowed down his head and sighed. "You're not helping."

"Okay, what's wrong?" asked Cortana.

Essingdon ran both of his hands through his neatly cut hair and then rested them behind his head. "Parangosky is still in power, her decisions are irrational," he sighed in frustration.

"What did she do this time?"

"She wants to replace me."

The AI gave a short laugh, "replace you? Essingdon, no one can replace you."

"Good thing Hood saw it that way, or else I'd be out of a job," exhaled Keyes.

"Parangosky has made a lot of enemies during her time as head of ONI, most of them in HIGHCOM and the Security Committee."

"Does Hood know about her operations during the Schism? She planned to disable the Elites and weaken them. The idiot almost made us lose the war."

"Yes, Hood does know about those missions, but he can't do anything about it, Parangosky has covered her tracks. She's already on thin ice."

"Okay, staying in this office won't make me feel better," said Keyes as he pulled himself up from his chair, straightened his tie and threw on a black blazer, "I'm going for a walk."

The glass doors de-glazed itself and whispered opened, once Essingdon had passed through, it closed with equal silence and glazed itself again.

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****Illium****

As the three moved out onto a plaza, a rough rectangular prism outlined in red appeared on the Spartan's HUD. John then looked directly at the object so the targeting reticule was centred on it. A small transparent box popped up in the centre of the HUD, and began a read out.

"Shepard, unarmed military-grade explosive, thirty metres north-east," said the Spartan as he took in the information.

"Copy that Chief," replied Jane as she moved up and into the open. The soft sunlight shimmered off her white and red themed suit of armour, giving her that blood angel look.

Shepard took point again, with the Spartan close behind her and Garrus hanging back to cover the rear.

"Vasir, I have unarmed military grade explosives here," Shepard said

over the COM.

"Hmmm," the reply came, "unarmed, that's sloppy work. You only use that kind of ordinance when you don't have the time. Keep me posted, I'm moving down to the lower levels."

"Copy."

The three arrived at a door above a staircase, which promptly hissed opened and allowing the party to move in swiftly.

"Damage is minimal here," said Garrus, "just a few bullet holes."

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The alarm then blared inside John's helmets as multiple contacts appeared on his HUD, their figure outlined in red.

"Contact!" The Spartan barked as he felt time slow and the adrenaline course through his veins.

A merc, hiding behind an archway peered out from cover and tossed a small disc like device. The sensors immediately scanned and identified it as a Flashbang and plot its trajectory.

"Flashbang!" yelled Garrus, "watch your eyes!"

The small saucer shaped object bounced and rolled before coming to a halt near the group.

Shepard quickly threw herself behind cover as the flashbang detonated and bullets began to fly everywhere. The rounds slammed into the walls, creating red-hot burning holes and showering the area with sparks.

The Spartan however wasn't caught off balanced by the surprise attack began to return fire. To him, everything moved in slow motion, the anti-material capabilities of his weapon combined with his suit's sensors made the ambushing force easy targets. His DM201 EBR coughed as it spat out rounds that were accelerated to terrifying speeds. The bullets over penetrated any light cover and bore straight through the attackers' skull, sending blood seeping down their white armour and onto whatever was behind them.

Shepard and Garrus quickly recovered and followed the Spartan as they began to press on.

"Vasir, I just met some light resistance," Jane spoke into her mic.

"Say hello to the Shadow Broker's personal army Shepardâ€¦ or goodbye, depends on what shape they're in now."

Two more contacts appeared on the Spartan's HUD. Their classifications were "heavies" also known as troopers wielding heavy weapons. John quickly aimed down his sights and squeezed the trigger before the combatants became a problem, sending them toppling over and their launchers clattering to the ground.

"He's better than you are," the impressed Shepard whispered to Garrus.

"Ugh," the Turian responded.

The group then proceeded through the more heavily damaged section of the office, where the fires were being doused and the walls riddle with black streak marks.

"Area clear so far," said the Spartan, he watched the orange displays on the desks flicker and wink off as they became waterlogged by the fire-suppressant systems. The group moved up and rounded the corner up ahead. A blue figure was then outlined on the HUD.

"One contact only. Its Vasir," said the Spartan.

The varying distance of information provided by the sensors began to annoy John slightly. The readings they gave off were inconsistent. He concluded that it was the metal alloys in the building that inhibited the systems. More reason for him to stay alert.

The large metal doors whirred and clicked open, revealing a waiting Vasir. The Spartan moved in and performed a quick sweep until relaxing his stance slightly. The room seemed to be in good condition, save the blood splatter on the walls.

"Sekat got his brains blown out before I could get to him," said Vasir, sounding slightly frustrated yet detached.

The Spartan could see the dead Salarian slumped on the floor, against the wall. The metallic panels were smeared in his green blood and bits of his flesh. Beneath his feet lay a dead Shadow Broker Operative, with blood oozing out of a hole quite slowly out of the back of his helmet. The sensors in the Chief's suit began to ping softly, the radar showed a blue dot, representing a friendly.

"Damn," Shepard cursed, as she lowered her weapon.

"Shepard," said John to Jane over their private COMs, "T'Soni is right behind us."

Jane gave a light nod to the Spartan and kneeled down to examine the Salarian's corpse. "Is this Sekat?"

"Must have been."

"No sign of that data Liara talked about. Looks like a dead end."

"Oh, speaking of which, did you find your friends body?" asked Vasir.

"You mean this body?" said Liara, her voice thick with anger. The Asari Scientist was soaked in water and had her pistol aimed at the Spectre.

"Liara!" said Shepard, relieved, "something I should know?"

"This is the woman who tried to kill me," said T'Soni as she advanced

on Vasir.

"You've had a rough day, so I'll let that slide" said the Asari Spectre as she backed up towards the window. "Why don't you put that gun down?"

"I saw you! I doubled back after I left. I watched you break into my apartment!"

"You didn't know where Liara went, because she hid the message," said Shepard as she aimed her rifle at Vasir. "You needed me to find it for you."

"Thanks for the help," Vasir said smugly.

While the three had been bickering, the Spartan had lined up his weapon; of course he didn't make it obvious since he was holding it from the hip. But thanks to the Infra-red pointer on the weapon, John had a bead on Vasir's forehead. Now all that was left was waiting for the right moment to pull the trigger.

"Once she had my location, she signalled the Shadow Broker's forces. They bombed the building to take me out."

Vasir backed up even further to the glass plane and folded her arms, keeping her purple eyes steady on Liara.

"She found Sekat, took his data, and killed him. I'm guessing she's still got the disk on her."

"Good guess," taunted Vasir as she held up the disk, "not that you'll ever see what's on it!"

The Spartan's augmented hearing then picked up that warping sound, coming from Vasir. The glass behind her began to crack.

"You pureblood bitch!"

That was as far as Vasir got. John's rifle coughed as he pulled the trigger thrice, immediately turning Vasir's head into a pulpy mess, and shattering a small section of the window behind her. The body jerked violently and then landed with a dull thud.

"That was easy," commented Garrus, "saved us a lot of time too."

Liara stepped into the puddle of blood and pried the disk from Vasir's lifeless hand. Seeing that it still pulsed red, the satisfied Asari tucked it away in one of her pockets.

"Sekat's personal datapad. This has what we need to find the Shadow Broker," she said as she entered commands onto her Omni-tool. "I'm putting the data through to the _Normandy_'s computers. We can beat the Shadow Broker's base in a few hours. He'll know about Vasir before long. If he decides to kill Feron!"

"We'll get Feron out of there alive, Liara. I promise," said Jane, reassuring her friend.

"I know. You're here to help. Just like always."

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6. Lair of the Shadow Broker: Part 2

****Lair of the Shadow Broker, Part 2â€|****

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****Haglaz, Shadow Broker's Base****

John watched the storm raged outside the shuttle, and riding the lightning, was the Shadow Broker, and his base. The winds howled and thunder cracked, the Spartan felt the tiny craft struggle against the storm. But the base seemed to glide effortlessly through. He gazed at his loadout, making sure everything was up to speed. The Spartan had selected a loadout best suited for ship-boarding actions, which was the energy sword, semi-auto shotgun, M7SC and SCAR.

Liara T'Soni watched Shepard's unique companion from the corner of her eye. She had met with some of the new team members while on the Normandy. Each had given their trust and loyalty to their Commander, but the Spartan stood out to her most. The Asari found it hard to believe that there was a living person under that armour, let alone human for that matter. He moved with such precision and fluidity, and spoke rarely. Jane had told Liara her that the Spartan is a Supersoldier from a long lost era. Shepard had been vague, but then again, she didn't have much information.

"Hagalaz," said Liara as she gazed out of the viewport, "The oceans boil during the day, then snap-freeze ten minutes after sundown."

"The Shadow Broker lives in this?" Shepard asked.

"His ship follows the sunset. Completely undetectable in the storm, unless you know where to look."

"How do we get inside?"

"The shuttle bay is locked down. We'll need to land on the ship and hunt for a hatch."

"But we can't stay outside for long. There's a constant lightning storm where the hot and cold air collide."

"Are there any anti-aircraft or anti-ship defences?" asked John, slightly concerned.

"If you mean any kind of defences that will bow us out of the sky? No. But they do have patrols that cover for that."

"That's comforting to know," said the Spartan.

The shuttle came alongside the hull and shook as the winds blasted against it. Jane and Liara eased on their breathing apparatus as John opened the doors.

The trio leapt onto the ship and fanned out, while the shuttle

retreated. John swept the field back and forth, the constant clashing of electricity and the shaking flaps gave the ship an ancient feel. He didn't like it, the ship made him feel uneasy. There was something familiar about it.

"Something wrong Chief?" asked Jane.

"Nothing," said the Spartan as he pushed away his doubts.

"Okay, let's move on then."

"It's hard to pinpoint in this lightning, but I'm picking up signals from a communications array near the back of the ship. There's nothing below but maintenance equipment. We have to find an entrance near the back shielding."

Once again, Jane took the lead. She promptly switched the ammo type of her Mattock to AP, and proceeded down to the side walkways of the ship.

John looked over the edge and saw the olive brown clouds and the misty winds batter the ship, yet the vessel remained steady and unyielding.

"Maintenance drones!" warned Liara.

A red, light based spherical object appeared from the hatches. Its energy signature instantly appeared on the Spartan's sensors, he was clearly impressed by this branch of unique technology.

"Why are they attacking us?" asked Jane.

"They must think we're debris from the storm."

The Adept engulfed herself in a blue mist and quickly dispatched the drones in a biotic blast. The red sphere's immediately flickered and faded away, allowing the group to press on. There was a nagging feeling in the back of the Spartan's mind, something just felt wrong about the entire place. He felt like it wasn't going to be an easy fight. But he stuffed away his doubts and focused back onto the task at hand.

His suit sensors beeped, giving him enough time to dive out of the way as a missile sailed overhead and slammed into a side railing. The Spartan sprinted forward and vaulted over the barrier, the heel of his boots came down with crushing force through the Heavy's visor. The woman didn't even get a chance to scream before her face was crushed into pulp. The Supersoldier steadied himself as he landed onto the metal hull, and shot a trooper with his shotgun. The unfortunate operative convulsed as the rounds tore through his body and shredded his insides. These semi-automatic shotguns fired unique ammunitions, the first half of the gauges expelled would armour-piercing, while the second half that followed in behind were needler shards. Every time the Spartan pulled the trigger, a violet tongue would lash out violently and shred its target with explosive force.

John gauged the battlefield, and decided that it would be best not to engage active camouflage, as the confined spaces directed the flow of battle, thus leaving little room to flank.

"Here we are," said Liara as the group arrived at the entrance. A trooper then tried to jump the Asari, but his shots just bounced harmlessly off her shields. The operative was then quickly lifted into the air by Shepards biotic power, the man was screaming as he knew the higher he floated, the closer he would come to death by electrocution. T'Soni then delivered the killing blow as she threw the trooper off the ship. Being thrown clear of the vessel's protective charge, the operative was immediately incinerated by lighting.

The Spartan winced inwardly; he had been electrocuted before and knew that once you started screaming, you cannot stop until you were dead. He knew that because of his frequent interrogation sessions with the Innies.

"This will just take a moment," said Liara.

"How long's a moment?" asked Shepard.

"The algorithm I'm uploading will allow us to bypass the doors," the Asari then sighed, "I haven't tested it before, and it's illegal even on Illium."

"That's, comforting to know," Jane said sarcastically.

The Spectre took cover behind a barricade which lay atop the ramp that led down to the door. From her central position she began to hammer the approaching mercs with her biotic abilities. Her warp attacks hampered many of the Asari Commandos, allowing her to finish them off with shockwave, sending them flying into the air and caught by the lightning.

The combined biotic power of Shepard and Liara, coupled with the Spartan's hyper reactive and accurate reflexes, caused wave after wave of operatives to be broken and destroyed. Some were riddled with scorch marks; others were unfortunate enough to be thrown clear of the ship, but most were turned into pulpy mass of gore and twisted armour.

"They'd be a lot more effective if they attacked all at once," said Liara.

"Don't jinx us," grunted John.

"Best not to give them any ideas," added Jane.

Using his enhanced agility and strength, the Spartan vaulted himself onto the alcove above the entrance, giving him a wide area of fire. The SCAR roared as lances of ion beams slashed at the counter-attacking forces. The barricades that covered their avenues of approach began to turn into shreds of burning metal, forcing them further back.

"They're coming at us in greater strength now," said the Asari.

"You just had to give them tactical advice," said Shepard exasperated.

"At least there will be less to deal with when we get inside," said

John.

"Keep dreaming Chief," grunted Jane as she picked off an operative with a headshot.

The armour-piercing round of the Mattock struck her between the eyes and blowing out the back of her helmet, dropping the operative instantly as her missile launcher clattered onto the deck.

Another trooper made a mad dash for the launcher dropped by his comrade. The Spartan, having spotted this, fired a quick burst, melting the weapon and roasting the man's hand. The operative screamed in shock as the stump of where his right hand was cauterised by the sheer heat of the Ion beam, but his screams didn't last long. They were quickly ended by Liara who sent a bullet crashing through his skull.

The console on the door then beeped, indicating that it was unlocked.

"We're in," smiled Liara.

John finished off the last trooper before jumping off the alcove and onto the ramp below. The doors hissed open, allowing the group to enter the stable environment. As the entrance closed behind them, Shepard and Liara took off their helmets and readied their weapons. John's scanners began to pick up a group massing at the end of the olive brown hallway. Whoever designed this ship was a tactical genius, or it was just a coincidence, because the approach to the main section was through a very narrow and exposed corridor.

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Jane could hear the Shadow Broker reel off orders over the ship's intercom system.

"I want all teams to move in a deal with the intruders," he said in a deep voice.

A squad rushed out and took up firing positions at the end of the hallway, one provided covering with his M8, while his comrades lay on the heavy fire support with rockets and attack drones. The Chief fired a quick burst, disabling the drone, and shifted his attention to the Salarian Engineer. Another quick roar from the SCAR quickly turned the Slaraian's head into ash and burning flesh. Shepard dealt with the remaining troops with her biotics, sending a shockwave into the enemy formation.

"How many guards do the Shadow Broker have?" asked Liara.

"Told you," replied Shepard.

The Spectre stayed close behind the Spartan, for cover. She watched his shields flare gold as enemy fire splashed and ricochet off his energy barrier. But what caught her attention was the shotgun. An Asari Commando popped out from a corner, trying to take the group by surprise. But she made the greatest mistake of her life; never take a Spartan on in close quarters. The Supersoldier slammed the butt of his weapon onto the Asari's temples with shocking force. The Commando

stumbled and dropped her weapon, before being kicked squarely in the chest. Jane could hear the Commando's shields overload, and her armour crack under the impact. The Commando was sent reeling end over end, and collided into the mass of soldier's down the hallway.

The Spartan resumed his firing; the group of mercs stumbled and jerked violently under the hail of specialised ammunition. Jane could see the streaks of violet lash at the troopers; she heard the constant thump, as round after round was fired. The Chief had emptied his entire clip into the group, and a few seconds later, he was awarded with a bright violet flash and a crackling explosion. The bodies were tossed aside like ragdolls, allowing the team to pass through the blood smeared corridor.

Shepard followed Liara through the eerie corridors and arrived at an interrogation room. Feron lay strapped into the chair, looking absolutely exhausted and nearly broken. His eyes were closed and his head tilted to one side. While John swept the room, Jane and Liara moved closer to Feron. The Asari's conflicted expression softened to one of sadness and despair as she saw her Drell friend.

"Feron!"

The Drell twitched, and opened his eyes slowly.

"Liara?" he gasped.

"Hold on," the Asari said as she ran towards the console, "we're getting you out of here."

She entered in a few keys in the hopes of freeing her friend.

"No!" he breathed. Electricity then wracked through his body, causing him to scream as he endured the excruciating pain.

"Feron," said Liara as she pulled away from the console.

"What the hell is the Shadow Broker trying to do to you?" asked Shepard.

"The equipment is sensitive to tampering," the Drell grunted in pain, "this chair plugs into the Broker's info network. You have to shut off the power. Pull me out now and my brain cooks."

"Do you know where we can cut the power?" asked Liara.

"It won't be easy; you'll have to go to central operations."

"What's the point of this cage?" asked Shepard.

"I don'tâ€¦| urghhhh!" Feron was immediately cut off as another dose of electricity was sent through his body.

"It's a neural grounding rod," explained Liara, "the medical equipment is to make sure heâ€¦|" she paused for a moment before looking back at Feron, "â€¦|expire. We have to shut this place down!"

"Where'd the Broker get the mercs?" asked Shepard.

"Raised his own private force," Feron answered, "They're completely loyal."

Another shock wracked the Drell's body again.

"Shepard we really don't have the time," urged T'Soni.

"What do you know about the Broker?"

"He did this too me."

"I was hoping you'd know what he is."

"I never got a good look, but he's big. The guards are terrified of him."

"A Krogan?" asked Liara.

"I don't know, but not everyone who visits his office comes back out."

"Easy or not, we're all getting out of here."

"Good," the Drell relaxed back into his chair, "central operations is down the hall. You know the Shadow Broker's waiting for you right?"

"I'm counting on it."

"We'll be back for you Feron," said Liara, though it sounded like she was trying to reassure herself more than reassuring her friend.

"I'll try not to go anywhere," said Feron, trying to ease the nerves of his rescuer. But then he turned to the Spartan.

"The Broker has mentioned you before Spartan."

"How do you know that?" asked John.

"He talks about you a lot over the past week."

Shepard remembered that the Spartan had been thawed out about ten days ago. His rate of adaptation to his new environment was amazing. But since the Broker knew of the Supersoldier's existence, it was a cause for concern. It either meant that the Broker had people on the ground during the excavation of the bunker, or he knew how to get into the encrypted Alliance channels.

"What has he been saying?" asked the Chief.

"I didn't hear much, but he says that he cannot take you head on, so he's gotten in something to deal with you."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

The group quickly filed out, and the Spartan slapped in a fresh clip into his shotgun.

"I want all teams to outpost C," said the Shadow Broker of the intercom.

Resistance began to thin out, and by the time they reached the Broker's office, there was only one guard standing in their way. Shepard quickly finished him off by slamming him into a wall with her biotics.

As Jane approached the entrance, the doors parted, revealing a darkened room.

The group glided into the circular room, at the corners stood grey pillars that offered some lighting. The ceiling overhead was made of glass, and Shepard could see the electrical currents flow through the liquid above. Over on the darker side of the room, sat the Broker, behind him was an elevated platform, and to his left was another room.

Shepard could see the Spartan's stance had increased in tension; his weapon was aimed at the Broker's head as shifted to the right side of the room.

The Broker leaned forward and clasped his three fingered hands as the rest of the group trained their weapons onto him.

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John's index finger hovered close to the trigger. He could recognise this alien anywhere, its silhouette was unmistakable. He was tempted to pull the trigger, but he wanted answers. And if the Broker knew of the Spartan, no doubt he'd have some kind of defence to counter or at least hold out against John's weapons. He was also sure that the room was coated in a special alloy, because his suits sensors did not detect anything in the room on the way in.

"Here for the Drell?" the Broker asked in his deep raspy voice, "reckless, even for you Commander."

"That bombing wasn't exactly subtle," Jane rebutted.

"Extreme, but necessary," the Broker justified.

"No it wasn't!" argued Liara, "neither was caging Feron for two years!"

"Dr T'Soni, your interference caused all this. Feron betrayed me when he handed you Shepard's body. The Drell is simply paying the price."

"Someone was bound to come after you for working with the Collectors," said Shepard.

"It was a mutually beneficial partnership. Your arrival is convenient, the Collectors' offer still stands."

"It will be pretty hard to run a base this size with no crew."

"They're replaceable," the Yahg said coldly.

"Your arrival is barely an interruption. Enough talk, my operations are too crucial to be compromised by a traitor."

"You're quite confident for someone with nowhere left to hide."

"You travel with fascinating companions Doctor. The Spartan here holds many technological secrets." The Broker then faced John.
"Surprised that I know of you?"

"Not many people here know of me," said the Spartan in his baritone voice.

"My forefather's spoke of you. You're kind slayed many of the Covenant, killed so many who walk the path of light. You will be left behind."

"We have a fanatic," said John, "an overzealous fanatic. There is no such thing as the Great Journey, it's just a lie."

"The Prophets speak the truth! You and the Elites will burn in a sea of holy light, while I will join the Forerunners."

"So that's how they turned you," said John, "they lifted you from your homeworld, and promised you transcendence."

"I will become a god."

"I expected more intelligence from one that holds so much. The Great Journey is a lie; the sacred rings were for containment."

"You may have destroyed the sacred rings, but more still remain. Once I've dealt with the Collectors, I can focus on the Great Journey."

"You are deluded; the rings were created to stop the Flood."

â€|

Jane felt an odd sensation as the conversation between the Spartan and the Broker allowed her to delve into the missing piece of history. She was shocked off the Shadow Broker's faith. The religion he followed was similar to that of the Hanar, except in this case he worshipped a race called the Forerunners.

"Shepard, what's going on?" asked Liara.

"The Chief seems to have a history with the Yahg."

â€|

"I know that I cannot stop you," said the Broker, "But I have brought people who can."

A low rumbling growl came out from behind John, he knew that growl.

And for the first time in his lifeâ€| he cursed.

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****A/N:** As I was writing this story, I realised the imagery BioWare used for the ****_**Lair of the Shadow Broker**_****. Electricity symbolises power, the storm represents the danger of misusing power, etc. Who says games can't be intellectual as metaphysical poetry or dualistic literature?******

7. Lair of the Shadow Broker: Part 3

****Lair of the Shadow Broker Part 3****

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The air around the Spartan seemed to shimmer slightly, but before he could pull the trigger, John was knocked clear from the ground. The glass pane behind him shattered under the sheer impact, before his back slammed onto the deck below.

"Damn it," muttered John as he tried to recover.

WHUPMH!

John convulsed violently as he felt something heavy land on his stomach. His shields were drained considerably. The air in front of him shimmered again, and slowly, something faded into sight. The alien on top of him was colossal in size, its dense muscles tensed as it pinned down the Spartan. Slowly, the behemoth ape like creature leaned forward, and snarled. Droplets of saliva splashed onto the Spartan's reflective gold visor.

"Demon!" the crimson red armour, black beast growled.

"Hey Baby Kong," John taunted, "want a banana?"

The Supersoldier quickly wiggled free from the Chieftains' grasp, dropped a cooked frag, and launched himself away from the hulking alien. He then raised his weapon and fired three shots, but the rounds just bounced harmlessly off the Jiralhanae's shields.

"You will not kill me Demon!" he roared.

BOOM!

The grenade went off with a violent explosion; specks of molten thermite riddled and melted the deck, causing smoke to curl up from the red hot holes.

Stumbling for only a moment, the Chieftain quickly recovered and growled. The Brute quickly raised his Gravity Hammer and brought down to bear on the Spartan. The melee weapon collided onto the decking and sent out a shockwave which threw the Spartan like a ragdoll onto the far side of the room.

John bounced once on the deck and dropped his shotgun, before slamming into the wall. His shields drained even further. Black dots swarmed his vision before dissipating slowly away. The collision had jarred him greatly, and if it wasn't for the hydrostatic gel layer, he would be suffering from internal bleeding.

The Supersoldier pulled himself up from the ground, and unslung his SCAR. He quickly squeezed the trigger and sent lances of Ion beams down range. The weapon roared like a violent discharge of electricity as its rounds splashed across the Chieftains shields.

"Rah!" he roared, "kill the Demon!"

Five Brutes began to appear out of thin air, their violet indicated that they were Ultras.

The Spartan swore again. How the hell did the Shadow Broker get his hands on six Brutes? He quickly ejected the spent clip and slapped in a fresh cell into his weapon before firing again. The Ultras then raised their Spikers and unleashed a hail of superheated spikes at the Commander.

The Chief quickly strafed right as the spikes smashed onto his shields are impaled themselves onto the wall behind him.

John's enhanced vision noticed the yellow tint in the eyes of his aggressors. He had encountered these kinds during the war, drug enhanced Brutes. They were a nightmare to deal with, especially when they went berserk.

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Jane watched in shock as the Chief was bull rushed out of the room, she then heard a dull thud as he landed on the deck bellow, followed by explosions and gunfire. She wanted to go aid the Spartan, but right now, she needed to deal with the Shadow Broker.

The monstrous alien roared as he snapped his desk in two, and threw both halves at her and T'Soni. Shepard quickly dive tackled her friend out of the object's trajectory. The furniture shattered as it collided into the bulkheads of the ship, showering Shepard with chips of alloys.

The Commander quickly vaulted over a bulkhead and took cover behind it. The Shadow Broker roared again and unslung his Revenant. He wielded the weapon with one arm, but the customisation and his sheer strength negated the recoil, thus accuracy was barely affected.

The Spectre then rose from cover and fired her Mattock at the Shadow Broker, draining his shields. However, the Yahg began to retaliate with disturbingly accurate fire, forcing Jane into cover again.

Liara then flanked the Broker, and unleashed a whole clip from her Locust SMG before unleashing a torrent of warp biotics, weakening the Broker's armour. The Yahg growled and turned to face the Asari as she moved back into cover.

"You think you can kill me Asari?" the Broker roared.

Shepard took the window of opportunity and unleashed another heavy warp blast, causing the Broker to stumble back, allowing Jane to fire a few more rounds. But he took a defensive stance and engaged a protective barrier around him. It seemed to be drawing power or attracting currents from the flow of energy above.

Liara fired upon the Broker's shields, but her rounds just ricocheted harmlessly off the white misty barrier.

"The shield's kinetically sensitive," said the Asari as she holstered her weapon, "energy and projectiles are bouncing off."

"Then we do this the hard way," smirked Jane as she cracked her knuckles.

Shepard quickly rushed the Broker, she grunted as she put in every ounce of her cybernetic enhanced strength into her punches. A wet sickening thud emanated every time her fist connected with the Broker's face.

The Yahg stumbled back and growled, noticing that the alien was off balance, Jane charged him again, except he had recovered faster than she had expected. An orange light-based riot shield from the Broker's Omni-tool crackled to life as it took shape, by the time Shepard had launched herself into the air. The massive alien instantly swatted her aside like a ball, causing Jane's back to crash onto the reflective grey deck.

The Commander quickly rolled away from her position and behind cover as rounds from the Broker's Revenant carved searing red holes into the tiles.

The Broker then raised his shield to protect himself while being able to fire at the same time, forcing the Asari Scientist and Spectre to rethink their strategies.

"Liara, keep him busy," ordered Shepard, "I'll flank around to the right and hit him with my Arc projector."

"Got it."

T'Soni rose from cover again and projected a number of biotic blasts at the Broker, causing him to stagger under the sheer force. Shepard on the other hand, kept low, and sprinted from cover to cover behind the nodes that had adorned the room.

The Spectre aimed her Arc Projector at the Yahg and charged up her weapon. It gave a light crackling sound as a lance of electricity shot out and splashed onto the Broker, then arced onto another node, damaging it considerably, before hitting the Broker again. The Yahg stumbled, and turned to face Shepard.

"I will kill you!" he roared, "the Great Journey cannot be denied!"

"Professional detachment to overzealous fanaticism," Jane growled, "the hell, are you indoctrinated by the Reapers!"

Rounds began to chip away the node Shepard to shelter behind.

"The Reapers are nothing compared to those who came before!"

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John dropped his SCAR. There was no way in hell that he could take on

five berserking Brute Ultras in this confined space, and his shotgun was too far away.

The Spartan quickly switched to his M7SC and Energy Sword, he wielded in SMG in his left hand, while holding the blade in his right.

Rapid dull thumps and unhuman roars resonated throughout the room. The Supersoldier twirled his blade, leaving blue wisps of plasma trailing in its wake. He quickly charged at the Brutes while firing his SMG until the clip was empty. He could feel the adrenaline course through his veins as his vision began to narrow, and everything moved in slow motion.

The magnetically accelerated rounds crashed and sparked across the lead Ultra's shields, draining it considerably, but not collapse it. John quickly discarded the empty weapon, and slashed upwards at the first Brute.

The superhot blade caused the shields to flare and fail, while melting the armour. The Brute roared in pain as the plasma blade managed to cook some of its flesh while the molten alloy continued to seep through the wound. John delivered a swift punch through the Ultra's head with all his might, causing the helmet bend, and shattering the Brute's skull. Blood and brain matter seeped out of the Ultra's head and ooze down the helmet, while bone pierced its skin from the inside. The once berserking creature came to a grinding halt like a potato sack, allowing the Spartan to leap over him.

The other Ultra's changed their direction and swung their weapons wildly. An Ultra on the Spartan's right brought the blade down upon John, who sidestepped, a clean miss. The Chief then slashed at the Brute causing its shields to spark and fail, he then delivered a sidekick into its stomach, crushing the torso armour plates, causing the alien to double over and heave out blood. The Spartan then stabbed the Brute clean through the back, causing the violet armour plates to bubble and glow red. The second Ultra didn't get a chance to scream before John jerked the blade upward violently, bisecting the neck and head into two.

The remaining three Ultras charged the Spartan again, but the human Supersoldier was faster. He heaved a frontal kick into the lead charger and performed a backflip. The shocking force caused a concussion, causing to Brute to stagger. John landed swiftly, and bull rushed the incapacitated Brute with surprising speed, and impaling the Covenant Warrior with his blade. The Brute gasped for air as searing heat burned through his body. The Alien knew that it was going to die, he decided that he would go out with a bang. As he was slammed against the wall by the Spartan, the Ultra reached into his pouch and armed two plasma grenades as it bear hugged the Supersoldier.

John realised what the alien was doing, but it was too late. The first two grenades exploded, causing the Spartan's first layer of shields to fail, and the rest of the Brute's grenades to detonate. A blue fireball of plasma engulfed the Spartan and caused his own grenades to ignited, but thankfully not blow up.

The Spartan was thrown back by the force of the combined blast; however his energy blade had been deactivated and clattered at the feet of the burned and mangled Ultra. Both his shield layers had

failed, and were at critical and he could taste blood in his mouth. The alarms droned inside his helmet as a status report appeared on the lower side of his blood smeared visor. Some of the thermite from his frags had melted through his armour and burned his flesh.

His HUD began to project a frantic readout:

Shield generator is critically damaged

Armour integrity severely weakened

Biofoam injectors are offline

External Repairs required.

John managed to clear his vision, but swore again. The Chieftain, who had been staying back, had finally made his move. The hulking warrior instantly brought his Gravity Hammer down to bear, but the Chief rolled away just in time. But the shockwaves still picked him up, and threw him into a wall on the far side of the room, damaging his shield generators. With his shields offline, the hydrostatic gel layer had the task of both absorbing the impact from the shockwave, the impact from the collision, and the Spartan's deceleration.

John swore again as he hit the ground chest first, black dots began to swarm his vision. Blood began to seep out of his mouth. He tried to move, but his body cried out in protest.

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Jane assaulted the Shadow Broker with another barrage of biotic attacks. Liara then projected a singularity field on top of the Broker, quickly draining his shields and breaching his armour.

The Yahg attempted to recover by reactivating his shields again. Seeing this, Jane rushed forward to unleash a barrage of punches. But this was a ruse, the Broker quickly smashed Jane aside, sending her flying through the air, and colliding into Liara.

The two rolled before coming to a halt, and recovered. Liara looked up towards the flow of energy overhead, and then looked back at Shepard.

"If you can get him to bring up his shields again, I've got an idea."

Jane nodded. She brought up her Mattock and squeezed the trigger in quick successions, draining the Broker's shields. The Broker then returned fire; Shepard then took cover, and ejected the thermal clip from her Mattock, before unleashing another barrage of rounds.

Liara then assaulted the Broker with another wave of biotic attacks, causing him to stagger and bring up his shields.

Shepard then rushed back in, and just like she had expected, the Broker brought down his shields. He then swung his riot shield at the Spectre, who had seen it coming, and rolled under his attack.

"That trick doesn't work twice ugly," yelled Jane.

The Broker roared again.

"Liara now!"

Confused at what was going on, the Yahg turned to look at the Liara. The Asari quickly used her biotics to shatter the glass ceiling above the Broker, causing the flow of energy to cascade onto his monstrous body.

The Shadow Broker struggled to get free, but failed; he gave one last roar of defiance before the charge built up in his body and exploded, turning him into nothingness. The Shockwave from the explosion threw Shepard back a few feet, but caused nothing serious. Liara quickly walked over, and gently extended her hand to help Shepard up. Jane was only too grateful and accepted the kind gesture of her friend.

As the Spectre gathered herself together and brushed aside a stray lock of her brunette hair, Liara began to pant. The shock of the end of a long journey had finally come to an end for her.

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The power began to fluctuate, Feron began to look around, the lights flickered, and then the Drell was gone.

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The Spartan managed to pull himself back up, but then a searing pain shot through torso, followed by an intense sensation of his insides being lacerated. John looked down at his chest plate; a couple of needler shards had shattered and dusted his feet slightly, but where the thermite had burned through, wisps of violet curled up slowly from the holes.

John felt the same pain wrack through his body again as another round slammed into him. He looked up to see a Brute wielding his shotgun. The Ultra pulled the trigger again, but was rewarded with an empty click.

Seeing an opportunity, the Supersoldier charged forward and launched himself at the Ultra. Over half a tonne of mass collided into the Ultra, causing the Brute's shields to fail. Having pinned down the alien, the Spartan quickly unsheathed his knife and plunged it deep into the alien's throat, causing blood to spray everywhere. As the Spartan yanked out his blade to engage the final Ultra, he could hear the Brute gurgling and choking on its own blood.

The last Ultra, John vaulted over to get to his energy sword. He gracefully leapt through air, and dive rolled to his weapon. The Spartan picked up the hilt, and the blue blade crackled to life. He quickly slashed the Ultra twice, the first time to drain the alien's shield completely, and the second time to cut it clean in half.

The Chieftain, was now alone, the mighty alien griped his Gravity Hammer and roared.

"Now it's my turn Demon!"

The two sprinted towards each other, but with John being the faster

one, he quickly rolled behind the Chieftain, and slashed at the Brute's legs. The alien then turned around and kicked the Spartan, who in turn sidestepped and caught the beast's legs. John then used his strength to shove the Brute into the air and onto his back.

A dull thump emanated as the Chieftain landed back first, and dropping his Gravity Hammer. The Spartan quickly grabbed the fallen weapon and brought it down on the Brute. A sickening thwack was heard as the Hammer drained the rest of the Brutes shields and crushed his chest. John could hear the ribs snap as the alien roared in immense pain. But the monstrous alien was in no means defeated. The Covenant Warrior then used his free arm to swat the Spartan aside. The Chief stumbled from the impact and dropped both melee weapons, giving the Chieftain enough time to pull himself back up.

"Your head will be mine Demon!"

John then took a low fighting stance and held his palms facing towards the Brutes. It was the signature stance of fluid Chinese Martial Arts.

The Chieftain rushed forward and threw quick successions of punches at the Spartan, who either swatted them aside or dodged them completely; however it forced the Supersoldier to be on the defensive.

The Chief needed to turn the table on his foe, and moved in low and fast. He quickly kicked the knees of the Chieftain, making the Brute lose his balance and stumble. John raised his stance and began to throw heavy but fast punches at the alien's shoulders, he was soon rewarded with a wet popping sound as he shattered or dislocated the Brute's right shoulder. Either way, his right arm was out of action.

The Chieftain then pushed forward and threw left handed punches, but the Spartan was faster, and caught the heavily developed arm. He then punched the Brute's left shoulder repeatedly, causing it to shatter.

With both arms out of action, the Chieftain went berserk out of desperation. He ignored the pain in his shoulders as he kicked the Spartan into the wall, and rushed over to pick up his Gravity Hammer.

John quickly shook his head as he recovered from the kick. He swore silently. He knew his body was near its limits, and without Biofoam or painkillers to keep him stable, he was going to drop soon. The Chief looked up, and swore again, before he felt thunderous force slam into him, and propel him across the room.

His vision began to swarm with black dots again; he began to cough out blood. The Spartan then glanced down at his armour, and noticed that blood was slowly seeping out slowly. The nanites in his blood stream were working overtime to stop the bleeding, but the constant physical attacks were reducing their efforts.

John had to finish this Brute quickly, and to his relief, his discarded SMG lay not too far away. He quickly reached over and slapped in a fresh mag for the weapon, just as the Chieftain began to charge, with his hammer held high.

The Spartan unloaded his entire clip into the alien's chest, slowly down the Brute's momentum. The Supersoldier then sprinted towards the Chieftain and crashed into the alien. John unleashed a hail of devastating punches directly at the Brute's bullet riddled chest; a wet thwack could be heard every time the hits connected. And to add further insult to the injuries, the greatly weakened armour plates would be bent inwards and cause more damage to the Chieftain.

The alien began to stagger, allowing the Spartan to unload his final attack. He quickly launched himself into the air and kicked the Brute's head with all his might. The Chieftain's head shot off into one direction so quickly that his neck snapped. The head dangled lifelessly, and finally, the body crumbled into a bloodied heap.

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The communication console then began to pulse red. Communiques from the Shadow Broker's Operatives rushed through. Liara just stood there, her eyes glancing across the screen.

"Shadow Broker, this is Operative Murat. We had a momentary connection failure. Can you confirm status?"

"Operative Shora, requesting update. Are we still online?"

"Shadow Broker, I've lost our feed. We are online and awaiting insutructions."

She then closed her eyes and bowed her head, having made her choice; she walked forward, and pressed the button.

"This is the Shadow Broker;" she said calmly, "the situation is under control. We experienced a power fluctuation while upgrading hardware. It disrupted communications momentarily. However we are back online. Resume standard procedures."

The doors then hissed open as Feron ran into the office with his weapon pointed at Liara, clearly he retrieved the pistol from a fallen operative.

"I want a status report on all operations within the next solar day. Shadow Broker out," Liara finished.

The console then faded back into a cool blue.

"Goddess of oceans," gasped Feron, "It's you. Youâ€| how?"

"Well, everyone who's ever seen him in person is dead, soâ€|" explained T'Soni.

"â€|You're the new Shadow Broker," finished Feron.

"Is taking over as the Shadow Broker really a good idea?" asked Shepard.

"It was either that or lose everything; his contacts, his trading sources. Those will really help us. With the Shadow Broker's information network, I can give youâ€| I canâ€|" Liara's voice began

to break and become hoarse as she fought back the tears.

"I'll, uh, check the power systems," said Feron, seeing his cue to leave. He slowly limped out of the office, still nursing his injuries.

Liara began to sob uncontrollably. Jane then placed her hand comfortingly on her friend's shoulder.

"It's over. It's finallyâ€¦ for two yearsâ€¦"

Jane quickly hugged Liara again.

"It's all right," she comforted.

Liara then wiped away the remaining drops of tears, and collected herself.

"I spent two years mourning you and Feron. And now I've got you both back," T'Soni said happily, "Iâ€¦ Let's see what we've got."

She turned back towards the console.

"No safeguards or user restrictions. It's like he never anticipated anyone but himself being here. And it's all ours," Liara smiled.

A crunching sound of glass quickly alerted Shepard; she looked back at the shattered window and gasped.

"Shit, I nearly forgot about you Chief," her voice was filled with genuine concern.

The Spartan staggered, the pain, the toll was near unbearable. He collapsed to his knees. The air seals popped with a hiss as he bent his head forward slightly and eased off his helmet. But his hands began to shake, it was a sign that his body was failing.

Jane then swiftly moved her hands to ease off the helmet and place it gently down, as she was doing so, she saw the Spartan's name inscribed on the underside of the helmet.

"John," she whispered, "your name is John."

Shepard gazed at the heavily blooded face, his pale skin made the blood look even redder than it actually was.

The Chief nodded, his breathing became more laboured as his eyes began to roll back.

"Hey John, stay with me."

Shepard quickly retrieved a salve of medi-gel and applied it to the Spartan's visible wounds. John managed to gain some semblance of consciousness, but he was slowly fading, his pulse was dropping to abnormal levels.

It pained her to see any of her teammates in bad shape, but it absolutely gutted Jane to see such a powerful soldier on the verge of death, and so heavily beaten.

"We need to get him back to the _Normandy_ for treatment," said Liara, "even if it's a Cerberus funded ship."

"Joker, bring the _Normandy_ in, get Chakwas ready, the Chief's been hurt bad."

****XXxxXX****

****Please reviewâ€| that is all.****

8. Reaper IFF

****A/N: I get the weird feeling that my story's concept is being paraphrasedâ€|****

****XXxxXX****

NORMANDY SR-2****

As the world began to fade away from John's vision, he felt a warm sensation as a blue mist began to engulf him. He felt himself being lifted gently from the metal deck, before finally, letting the darkness consume him.

"The Chief's life signs are failing rapidly," said EDI over the COM, "he has suffered major concussions and internal bleeding."

"Tell me something I don't know, EDI," grunted Jane.

"He is heavy," gasped Liara.

"Come one, we're almost at the lifts," Shepard's breathing became laboured; she had never used this much of her biotics for such a lengthy period. Every minute that passed proved to be ever more exponentially taxing on her.

As they neared the elevator, the doors whispered open, revealing Samara, who quickly used her biotics to aid Liara and Jane.

"Thank you Samara," breathed Shepard, "EDI, is the medical bay prepped?"

"Yes Shepard."

"Good."

The three biotic users quickly moved the critically injured Spartan threw the crew deck and into the med bay. Several off-duty personnel who viewed the Chief as a figure of immense power and combat prowess, were absolutely shocked to see such him critically wounded.

His reflective gold visor was cracked; his armour plates were riddled with blackened holes, and scorch marks. Many of the crewmen didn't know him personally, but gathered outside the med bay anyway.

John was then eased onto the operating table, allowing Shepard much needed respite as she sat down in an empty chair.

"Shepard," said Liara, "I will go back to the Shadow Broker's ship to

make sure that there aren't any more nasty surprises waiting for us."

"I shall accompany you," added Samara.

"Take the rest of my team with you and comb the ship thoroughly," said Jane, "if you need, help, call me, otherwise I'll be here."

"Okay."

The two Asari quickly left the med bay, and a few moments later, Shepard felt the dull thump as the hangar bay opened, signalling her team's departure.

"Commander One-one-seven, suffered major internal bleeding, and major concussions," said Mordin as he read the results from the scans, "hmm, internal lacerations, bullets still lodged inside body, however rounds are armour piercing, not hollow point or shredder. Lacerations caused by splintering of unknown substance. Intriguing, would like to run test on substance."

"What's the unknown substance," asked Jane.

"Don't know, extracting now," smiled the Salarian Scientist.

"He's lost much less blood than I had expected," said Chakwas as she retrieved the surgical equipment, and activated a sterilization field around the wounded soldier. The field was to contain any airborne bacteria or particles from entering or leaving the triage area, thus allowing onlookers to be nearby.

"Hmm, removing armour will be problematic," pondered Solus, "self-lock, anti-tampering, will have to work within confines of armour openings."

With that, Mordin took the helm of the operation, preferring to work without automated assistance, mainly because those machines weren't programed to operate on subjects still encased in their armour.

Chakwas began to insert probe cameras and monitoring devices into the breaches of the armour, so that she could monitor any changes in the Spartan's condition immediately.

"Interesting, crystalline substance is moving, blue glow emitting from subject, very interesting."

It was clear that the Salarian Scientist became deeply drawn in by the complexity and the mystery of the situation.

"Would like to know more about subject, hmm, microscopic lacerations are self-healing at a rapid rate," he said as he looked at camera-04.

"Zooming in," said Chakwas as she entered in a few commands.

Shepard watched the monitor as it began to magnify on a wound covered in metallic grey blotches. As the image began to become clearer, Jane could see Nanites moving in to treat the damage.

"Nanites, interesting, would like to run tests, maybe extract a sample."

Mordin quickly rammed a syringe into John's flesh and extract a drop of blood, but to his surprise, the contents of the syringe ignited in flame.

"Safeguards, smart person," smiled the Salarian.

Jane could possibly swear that Mordin was like an evil genius and a morally guided scholar wrapped into one person. The two sides seemed to negate each other, leaving the curious personality behind.

"The Nanites in the Chief's bloodstream are reducing blood loss. I have also detected EM signatures emanating from him."

"Is it coming from the armour?" asked Shepard.

"No, they seem to be originating from his brain and nervous system."

"Cybernetic implants, coupled with augmentations make the subject," the Salarian took a quick pause for effect, "make him, the perfect soldier."

"Can you tell me anything else about him?" asked Jane.

"Hmm, scan show subject's body has been augmented, all cognitive and physical aspects enhanced. Would put Miranda's father to shame," smiled Mordin.

"That's a bit mean professor," said Chakwas.

"No bugs in room, I'm safe."

"You know I could just tell Miranda," jibbed Shepard.

"Doctor-patient confidentiality here, topics discussed in room, not permitted outside unless patient deems necessary."

The room lapsed into a comfortable silence as Mordin and Chakwas worked on removing the foreign objects from the Spartan's body.

****XXxxXX****

****Installation 00; Forbidden City; Storage Bay****

Essingdon's eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room, he circled around the cryopod that lay in the centre and let a sad smile form across his lips. He never really got the chance to see her face that often. He hoped that he could talk to her once more. But time never let his hopes come to pass. Parangosky in particular, that woman never gave him a moment of respite. Though with the preparations to go back to Earth, underway, the Head of ONI had slackened up on Section III considerably, thus giving Keyes the time he so desperately wanted.

Ever since the discovery of the Forerunner technology trove on Onyx and additional Archives on Forerunner installations, Parangosky had been ordering Section III to initiate so many Research projects. This meant that Keyes couldn't go on leave. Right after he revived Dr Halsey, he had to go right back into the fray.

This secret he kept in this room was one that only he knew. He had kept it away from Cortana and his mother for so many untold years. It was for the best, the smaller number of people who knew about this, the better. What he hoped to embark on next, he knew that Hood would definitely approve, but what of his mother? And what of _her_?

In the end, it all came down to _her_. He hoped that it would be a good choice.

"So much time has passed," he whispered to her, "do you want to come back? So much has changed since you left, but I do want you to see what you've helped to accomplish."

A small tear streaked down Essingdon's cheek. He wanted her back, but if he did bring her back, it could be wrong ethically and morally. Though who can define ethics and morals for a scientist? People say it's ambiguous and grey, others argue that there's only black and white, and that grey is composed of black and white dots. Yet it all comes down to where a person is standing. Keyes didn't know where he was standing or what he was looking at, morally and ethically. At a young age, he learnt that doing what feels right isn't always what is logical and vice versa. So what could be said here? He had to take a leap of faith, but rarely does a leap of faith feel right, and never is it logical.

The young scientist closed his eyes and exhaled, for the first time in his life, he would do something irrational, because rationality wouldn't get anything done.

"Do it now, regret later," he muttered.

Keyes promptly left the room to make preparations. As he returned to his office, Cortana appeared on the holotank beside him.

"Good grief Essingdon, you look you haven't slept in days. What would your mother say?" smiled the AI, in a maternal manner.

"Sorry, just been up late doing some preliminary tests," Essingdon yawned as he placed his coat onto a hanger, "I assume you have some news for me?"

"Yes, the expedition has been postponed by a year or so, exact date has not been confirmed."

"Very well then, Cortana."

Now is the time thought Keyes, _now is the time._

****XXxxXX****

Normandy SR-2****

"Chief's signs stabilising, body healing, excellent," smiled Mordin,

"have extracted all crystalline, and other foreign materials, now waiting for permission to test substance from Commander One-one-seven."

"Well done Doctors," said Shepard, who had watched the entire operation from start to end.

A knock then rang from the doors, and in walked Liara and Samara, carrying in the Spartan's weapons.

"How is he?" asked the Justicar as she placed John's assortment of weapons beside him.

"He's stable now."

"Stable, but will not be conscious for another four days," added the scientist.

"So, we'll have to go get that Reaper IFF without him," said Jane.

â€|

****Derelict Reaper****

Joker grunted as the Normandy was bashed by solar winds.

"What's with all the chop, Joker?" asked Jane as she jogged into the cockpit and steadied herself on Joker's chair.

The alarms from the consoled droned continuously as the Flight Lieutenant fought to keep the _Normandy_ stable.

"Doing my best," he replied, "the winds gusting at five-hundred k-p-h."

The Stealth frigate soared through the solar winds above the brown dwarf as it neared the ancient derelict Reaper. Whoever had gutted the Cuttlefish shaped vessel did so with overwhelming firepower. Parts of the hull were reduced to slag, while others had gaping holes torn into them.

"There's a second ship alongside the Reaper," said Joker as he read the reports from the scans, "it's not transmitting any IFF, but the LADAR paints its silhouette as Geth."

"I guess we know why the science team stopped reporting in." Jane had concluded that a Geth presence had wiped out the science team stationed aboard by the Illusive Man.

The engine's hummed dimmed down, and the alarms ceased as the _Normandy_ stopped shaking.

"What just happened?" asked Shepard as she pulled herself up to her full height.

"The Reaper's Mass Effect fields are still active," answered Joker as he turned to face the Commander, "we just passed inside their envelope."

The stealth frigate glided through the illuminated abyss and passed the torn out sections from the derelict Reaper, as she approached her main target.

"Eye of the hurricane huh?" muttered Joker as he returned to his task.

Shepard spun on her heels and headed towards the air lock. This time, she didn't want to take any chances, so she took a larger team than she normally would on any other mission. The Spectre was after all, venturing into a Reaper, and didn't have John by her side.

Her team consisted of Jack, Samara, Grunt, Kasumi, Tali and Garrus.

As the team passed through the airlock and boarded the Reaper, they were met with the sight of Cerberus architecture. And though Jane hated to admit it, it was a comforting sight.

"Exploring an abandoned area, expecting something mechanical and nasty to jump out at any moment, just like old times," Garrus reminisced.

"It's been dead for thirty-seven million years," said Grunt, "there can't be much aboard."

"Ugh," Kasumi sighed in disgust, "this place gives me the creeps Shep."

"Prefer being shot at by a gunship than this?" said Jane referring to the Hock heist.

"Any day Shep, at least I get to fight the gunship in beautiful broad day light by a wonderful vista."

"Think of it as a change of scenery Kasumi," deadpanned Jack.

"I still don't feel any better."

The team quickly moved through the ship in a leap frogging movement, taking the time to stop and scavenge anything of use and gather data. Every time Shepard played a log entry, they all revealed the research team's slow descent into indoctrination.

"Yikes," whispered Kasumi, "this place really got to them."

"It screwed with their minds," said Grunt.

As they quickly moved through another airlock, a shockwave rippled through the ship, followed by the sound of turbines whining down. The sudden jolt displaced the slow flow of mist from the vents and caused the team stumbled for a moment before regaining their footing and taking up defensive positions.

"_Normandy_ to shore party," said Joker over the COMs.

"What just happened?" asked Shepard.

"The Reaper put up kinetic barriers; I don't think we can get through from our side."

"Great, trapped inside a Reaper, kinda like Hock's mansion," said Kasumi, "except Hock's mansion wasn't trying to brain wash us."

"We'll have to take down the barriers generators from in here, any idea where they are?"

"At the moment of activation, I detected a heat spike in what is likely the wreck's mass effect core," said EDI, "sending the coordinates now. Be advised, this core is also maintaining the Reaper's altitude."

"So when we take down the barriers to escape, the wreck fall's into the planet core," confirmed Shepard.

"And that means everyone dies, yeah," added Joker, "got it."

"If anyone any helmsman can pull us out of this thing before it reaches crush depth, it's you," said the Spectre encouragingly, "we'll make a sweep for survivors and find what data we can, standby."

"Aye, aye, good hunting."

As the team filed out of the airlock, they moved into the main body of the Reaper. And immediate contrast could be seen from what Cerberus had installed, and where the Reaper began. Massive cords ran along the ceiling, illuminated by a dark purple glow, and in the distance was a violet-white hue.

"There is a great darkness here," said Samara as she elegantly moved along the white catwalk.

"Everyone's dead, I've seen this to many times," muttered Garrus wearily.

"Well at least this time I don't have to worry about something slimy dumped on me," said Kasumi, referring to the Collector ship.

"Yes, instead of bugs, we get mechanical," added Garrus.

"They die all the same," said Grunt.

An eerily howl of winds blew throughout the cavernous section of the ship as Jane moved to a console. The data log showed the same message; the Reaper was affecting the Research Team's minds.

****XXxxXX****

****Installation 00, Forbidden City, Medical Wing, Operating Theatre****

Essingdon stood in the operating room and looked at the pod with great contemplation. His breathing was slow, while his mind worked at a million miles per hour.

"Thawing out subject," he breathed, "this is it."

Keyes used the automated machines to gently remove her from the cryopod and kept her suspended above the operating table.

He then turned on his log recorder and began talking.

"Subject has suffered major spinal cord damage, internal lacerations, and freezer burn. The stomach, liver, lungs and intestines have been breached to various extents. The brain and most muscles however, are unharmed."

The young scientist then prepared a cocktail of drugs, and surgical gear.

"I will attempt to remove all foreign objects and bone fragments from the subject, before treating the internal organs."

No turning back now.

****XXxxXX****

****Derelict Reaper****

"_RHAAAAH!_"_

"Husks," hissed Garrus, as the team heard the horrific cries.

"I guess this is the science team," muttered Jack.

The once human creatures rose up from the side of the catwalks and charged at the team, but the Husks were in too small of a number to do anything to the shore party.

Samara projected a throwing field and slammed a handful of husks into the side railing, causing them to shatter and fall off the side.

Jack and Shepard unleashed a barrage of shockwaves, ripping through the horde and tearing them apart, while the rest of the team picked off any remaining stragglers.

"Let's move on."

Jane led her team across the deck and subdued any husks in their way, quickly with professional precision. An eerie silence crept up on the shore party as they passed a pile of burned corpses.

Yet the silence was quickly broken by the sound of bullets finding their marks. The husks were thrown into Shepard's sight as they fell, emitting a sickening squelching sound.

"Sniper!" yelled Garrus, "I couldn't see the shooter. Survivors from the science team?"

The group moved into a smaller section of the Cavernous ship.

"Looks clear," said Kasumi.

"_RHAAH!_"_

"I spoke to soon," the thief sighed.

Husks began to clamber over the railings and swarm the team. A cacophony of gunfire filled the air as the team unleashed a hail of bullets on their target. The Spectre hurled blasts of biotics into the enemy formation, ripping them apart and sending gore into every direction. She then aimed down her sights and poured fire down range into an approaching Scion.

"Take down that Scion before it becomes a problem!" ordered Shepard.

Garrus, Grunt and Samara shifted their fire, while Kasumi and Jack covered them. The combination of four Mattocks working against the Scion was too much. The hulking mutation staggered and fell under the storm of bullets. Jane approached the beast slowly, and fired a few more rounds to make sure it was down, as the team secured the area.

The Spectre then looked up, and winced inwardly. She counted a handful of scientists impaled onto spikes across the cavern.

"We've seen this before Shepard," said Tali.

The bodies dangled lifelessly in a formation, as if they were there for ceremonial purposes.

"Dragon's teeth, my people called them," continued the Quarian, "the Geth have used them on Eden Prime."

"See how the room's arranged?" asked Jane as she looked around, "they treated this thing as if it was some kind of altar."

"That doesn't seem right; no one in their right mind would want this."

"You heard the logs. They were seeing things. Hearing things. They were being indoctrinated. We can't help these people now. We won't let the machines use their corpses like this."

The group departed through an adjacent airlock.

"Please standby, equalizing pressure with exterior conditions. Remember, safety is everyone's concern," said a recording, "we have gone five days without a workplace death."

The airlock then hissed open, allowing the group to silently move into formation.

Shepard slowly scanned the area for any more surprises as her team fanned out slowly.

Thoom, thoom, thoom.

The bullets quickly whistled past the Spectre's head, and smashed into something wet behind her. She quickly turned around to see three husks crumble in a heap, before looking back at the source of the bullets.

The entire team looked with great surprise as a Geth rose from cover. It had a massive hole in its right chest, and N7 armour plating on

its right arm. In its left hand, it wielded a sniper rifle.

"Shepard-Commander," it said, before turning around and walking away.

"That was the Geth sniper earlier. Since when do Geth talk to organics?" asked Garrus.

"It shouldn't be able to talk," Tali said with contempt, "a single Geth has no more intelligence than a Varren."

Shepard then led her team across the orange illuminated walkway as thunder roared in the distance.

"At least this scenery was more comforting than the last," said Kasumi.

"What is it with you and sceneries?" asked Jack.

"Scenery is like the sprinkles and cherry on top of a job, once you tried it, you can't go without it."

They passed through another airlock, and on one of the consoles, lay the Reaper IFF.

"This must be it," said Garrus as Shepard pocketed the IFF.

"So the Cerberus team did recover it, but where are they now?" asked Tali.

"I'm pretty sure the husks back there were a big indicator," said Jack.

As the doors on the other side of the airlock opened, the team found out that they could not progress forward, for a barrier was blocking their way into the mass effect core.

The Geth they saw earlier was working at a console. A handful of Husks tried to take it by surprise, but it turned around with lightning speed and eliminated the group with surgical precision before returning back to work.

It then disabled the barrier, allowing Shepard and her team to pass through.

However, another Husk climbed out from beneath the railing and slammed its fist into the Geth's head, and disabled it.

The shore party quickly moved through the room and took up defensive formations along the catwalk. Husks began to emerge from the landings on both sides, their howling nearly drowned out the weapons fire of the team.

"Aim for their legs," barked Shepard, "Tali, keep them distracted with your drones."

The husks funnelled down the central landing, all the team had to do, was crouch, point and shoot. Jack's shockwaves were used with devastating effect as the husks were thrown clear from the landing,

and smashed into a pulpy mass as they landed.

Jane focused her attention on the core, unleashing salvos of biotic energy at it. Eventually the core overloaded and winked out of existence.

"Shepard, want something done with that Geth?" asked Garrus, "it's still intact."

"Leave it there," said Tali, "you know what they are, if it gets into Normandy's computersâ€¦"

But the growl of more husks quickly cut the Quarian off.

"I can handle one Geth," said Grunt, "it's your call Shepard."

"Take the Geth with us, he was helping us."

â€¦

The team quickly moved in a leapfrogging formation towards the awaiting _Normandy_. Grunt and Garrus launched the Geth through the vessel's airlock before jumping in after it.

"Get on board," ordered Jane as she took down a trio of husks.

The remainder of the team vaulted across the chasm and into the ship. Making sure she was the last one, Shepard turned around and leapt into the airlock.

The doors hissed shut as Joker pulled away from the wreck before they reached crush depth.

Jane watched as the Reaper crumble and explode through the aft cameras, with great satisfaction.

â€¦

****NORMANDY, BRIEFING/COMMUNICATION ROOM****

"I think we need to discuss the unique piece of salvage we recovered," said Miranda.

Shepard paced back and forth, looking at the hologram of the Geth.

"For now, we've stored it in EDI's AI core," continued the Cerberus Operative, "we need better equipment to fight the Reapers. An intact Geth would be invaluable to Cerberus's cyber-weapons division."

"We'll have to disagree on that ma'am," interrupted Jacob, "I saw enough of these things on Eden Prime, space it."

"Cerberus has a long standing cash bounty for an intact Geth," rebutted Miranda, "I assure you the reward is significant."

"I want to know why it has a piece of N7 armour strapped to its chest," said Shepard as she folded her arms.

"Battle trophy, maybe?" suggested Jacob, "would a machine even care about that?"

"No, trophies imply emotions that AIs don't have," said Miranda, "I doubt it's more than a convenient field repair."

"I've killed hundreds of these things and never had the chance to talk to one," said Shepard, "this one tried to communicate with us, hell it probably saved our lives. Why?"

"Reactivating the Geth is a risk. If you do so, it should be for humanity's best interests, and not your curiosity."

"I still think our best interests involve an airlock."

"I'm not deciding one way or the other until I know what we've got here. I wanna start it up and interrogate it."

"If we activate it, there's no guarantee that we can deactivate it again," Miranda warned.

"Bullets can," deadpanned Jacob.

"That's not what I—"

"Thank you! Both of you for your recommendations. I've made my decision."

"Tali's going to freak when she hears about this," muttered Jacob. "So what about this Reaper IFF?"

"I have determined how to integrate it with our systems," said EDI as her Avatar appeared on the glass table. "However the device is Reaper technology. Linking it with the _Normandy's _systems, poses certain risks."

"I trust you EDI, I know you won't let anything happen to the ship."

"Understood Shepard, it may take several hours before the IFF is ready for shakedown, I will alert you as soon as it is ready."

"Sounds good, till then, its business as usual. Crew dismissed."

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:****

****Thank you for the kind reviews. All your concerns will be laid to rest, as I'm setting everything up for the ME3 arc.****

9. Boarding Action

****A/N: For all intents and purposes of moving this story along, I am skipping Legion's Loyalty Mission. For those who are still wondering, we're going with Geth Rewrite. This element has little impact on the plot, and the Chief has stayed out of the fight long enough.****

I may do a chapter on this later, but don't really want to.

XXxxXX

"_The SRS256 Epirus is the latest in advanced Gauss sniper rifle systems. It fires fifty calibre rounds at hypervelocity, negating wind and bullet drop beyond effective combat range. The weapon is capable of piercing UNSC military grade unshielded light to medium armour. Semi-automatic capabilities possessed by the weapon allow the sniper to effectively engage enemy armoured columns from extreme distances, however there is a brief cool down period after five successive shots."_

â€" LTCOL Dr Essingdon Keyes speaking to UNSC snipers

XXxxXX

**Normandy SR-2**

The hot water from the faucets cascaded down Jane's slender body, soothing any aches she had endured. A slight migraine hammered her head, causing her to rub her temples, alleviating some of the pain. She had been running herself ragged over the past week, and it was starting to get to her.

As her flawless skin touched the warm metal wall, she was reminded of the Spartan's helmet. Jane wondered if his fight had actually ended. He mentioned of a war when they first met. Joined her without hesitation. _Why?_ She wondered. What stake could he possibly have? Patriotism and glory disappears quickly in a war when death was lurking at every step of the way. She was doubtful that he was fighting for Earth, and certainly not the Alliance. It seemed more feasible that he joined her to look for a way to get back home.

In truth, she knew next to nothing about this enigmatic figure, aside from his combat prowess, and anomalies that seemed to surround him. First it was the Osprey Dropship, and then there were the events with him and the Shadow Broker. But then something occurred to the Spectre, she had thrown countless of Krogans that weighed about a tonne, sky high easily with her biotics. However with the Spartan and his armour, Jane had great difficulty, even with the help of Liara and later, Samara. The Commander estimated that the Chief would've weighed around half a tonne; it should've been a cake walk moving him. Yet it wasn't. She had to take so many energy drinks after that.

Shepard then stowed away her thought process, pulled herself up, turned off the faucets and donned her plain fatigues. Checking one of her private and encrypted terminal, Jane discovered that Liara had left behind a data disk for her to look into.

The Spectre interfaced the data disk to the monitor inside her cabinet and watched the feed play.

"_Shepard," said the new Shadow Broker, "after I left the Normandy with some of your team members, I had them sweep the ship while I examined the office. There was a recording of the fight in the next

room. I've taken the liberty of piecing together the video footage so you could know what happened." _

There was a slight pause before Liara continued, _"This battle was nothing like I've ever seen before Shepard, the brutality and precision of it all. The soldier accompanying you, he is unique." _

The recording showed Shepard a battle of titanic strength and speed, fought between John, and the towering aliens. Their language seemed to be a collection of roars and barks; however the Spartan seemed to understand them.

"_Hey Baby Kong, want a banana?" _

Jane could hear the punches and kicks being thrown, every time one of John's attacks connected, a sickening snapping sound could be heard. His fighting style resembled that of Chinese Martial Arts, specifically Fluidity and Fire principles. He moved with such grace and elegance, there was no doubt, that he was proficient in these arts. Most forms of hand to hand combat used by militaries involved rigid strikes, but the Spartan moved with great precision and fluidity, it was beyond human.

John unsheathed a cylindrical object from his belt, a blue energy blade then crackled and sparked to life. Wisps of ionised air trailed behind the blade, Shepard knew instantly that this weapon wasn't like an Omni-tool blade, it was made of plasma. A weapon like this would be devastating in close quarters; it would easily pass through any kinetic barriers and burn through armour like a blow torch through ice. However, the foes he was combating, had energy shields, and it took a couple of strikes to overload their defences and kill them.

Jane watched as the fight grew to be more desperate as the Spartan was being overwhelmed by the sheer brute force, and the behemoth creatures succumb to primal rage and instincts. One alien detonated himself, with what Shepard believed to be a plasma grenade. John's shields flared gold before winking out as he was enveloped by waves of plasma and thermite.

The thunderous force threw the Chief across the room. Smoke curled up from his body as he pulled himself up. But then his body convulsed and jerked violently as he was shot twice. An alien had picked up John's shotgun and turned it against the Supersoldier. With his shields gone, and his armour breached, the shotgun rounds must've done hell. But he still kept on fighting. Something Jane admired greatly.

The battle came to a climax when he engaged the leader of the pack. The ape like alien wielded a hammer that seemed to warp gravity, prompting the Spartan to move quickly and use precise attacks. After the leader had been defeated, it looked like John's injuries finally caught up to him as his movements became aimless.

With the engagement over, Liara appeared back on screen.

"_Feron and I have been running scans on these aliens; records in the Information's Archives show that they are called the Jiralhanae, and colloquially called Brutes by the UNSC. There are only small scraps

of information here, but apparently the UNSC stands for the United Nations Space Command. They were humanity's armed forces of their time, before the Human Systems Allianceâ€¦|"_

Jane was absolutely dumbstruck; this shred of information raised more questions than it answered.

"â€¦|_records show that over a thousand years ago, the UNSC and the Covenant were locked in a war that lasted for three decades, with humanity on the retreat. It seems that the Covenant were technological and numerically superior to the UNSC. However, in ground engagements and a couple of naval engagements, the Covenant forces suffered heavy casualties due to the UNSC's Supersoldiers, which they call Demonsâ€¦|"_

"I can guess why," Jane muttered.

"â€¦|_Now the Covenant seems to be a collective group of alien species, none that the Citadel has encountered so far..." _

Images and profiles regarding each species began to scroll across the screen.

"â€¦|_Their religion centres around them worshiping a long extinct species known as the Forerunners. Who they believed transcended or ascended into godhood by building 'sacred' rings that swept the galaxy in a Divine Wind, and all who believed would be placed onto The Great Journeyâ€¦|"_

"That explains some of John and the Yahg's conversation," Jane said.

"â€¦|_However, there was a political and genocidal event had occurred where the Covenant Separated. The Sangheili, a race of powerful warriors, and those under their command, allied themselves with the UNSC. The war ended in twenty-five fifty-three, with the UNSC and Separatist victory. It then goes on to say that another Human/Separatist-Covenant War broke out a few years later, which lasted for seven years. It resulted in the near destruction of the Yahg homeworld and total annihilation of Covenant planets. These locations match which planets flagged as uninhabitableâ€¦|"_

"A war that caused the destruction of so many planets, Shanxi was nowhere near that bad."

"â€¦|_Shepard, these archives are sorely lacking in information, they raise more question than they answer. I have already run some simulations and made a few speculations. It would seem that Humanity was not very far behind the Asari in technology, fifteen centuries ago. It would be accurate to say that the Human/Separatist-Covenant had reduced Humanity to the middle ages. Clearly the UNSC and the Covenant had evolved on a different technological path from us. But what doesn't make sense is why they did not discover the Mass Relays since it was in Sol, or why John still existsâ€¦|"_

Shepard, still processing the information, had already begun to ask herself salvos of questions. Mainly ones that centred on John's history. There was no doubt, that what Liara had said, was greatly related to the Spartan. It made the Spectre glad that she had taken a leap of faith and taken the Supersoldier aboard, what information he

held, would be crucial for the inevitable war between the galaxy and the Reapers. The mentioning of the 'Sacred Rings' were a concern as well; Jane hoped that the John would be able to shed some light on the matter.

"â€|_It would be prudent to ask him more about this."_

The recording ended, leaving the Spectre evermore curious, she needed to talk to the Spartan. Whatever was left of his history was still deeply intertwined with the present.

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose as she left her cabin and descended down the elevator and onto the crew deck. She planned to check in on the Spartan's condition.

As the doors to the med bay whispered open, the Spectre could see the sterilisation field had been brought down, and that John was still unconscious. But his armour however, looked less battered, the burns and the scratches were still there, but the holes weren't.

"How may I help you Commander?" asked Chakwas was running through some scans.

"What's the Chief's condition?"

"He's recovering faster than I expected. Although his armour is shielded from radiation, I was able to gather some results by scanning his head."

"What did the scans come up with Doctor?"

"The scans show that he has a cybernetic implant at the base of his skull."

"Is it a control chip?" asked Jane, concerned.

"No," answered Chakwas, "it is apparently a Positronic Brain Neural Interface."

"Aren't those illegal?"

"Here yes, but where our friend comes from, probably not. The UNSC are enigmatic at best, maybe he'll explain more over time. But I digress, the cybernetic implants most likely record selected memories and enhance cognitive abilities."

"Which means?"

"He's as smart as he is deadly. He'll be able to solve quadratic equations in a split second and process complex thoughts in a few moments."

"The perfect soldier," muttered Shepard.

"Exactly. The scans also show that his body has been heavily augmented, as far as I know, he's probably the smartest, fastest, and strongest human in the known galaxy."

Jane frowned for a split second; she knew that if Cerberus caught wind of this, heaven knows what they'll do.

"Did you record the results?" she asked.

"No Commander, this is a Cerberus funded ship, I'm not exactly keen on letting them have any ideas producing a Supersoldier like the Chief here."

Shepard exhaled in relief, "that's good to know, I'm not too fond of the idea of fighting an army of Supersoldiers. Anyway, EDI says that integration of the Reaper IFF into the Normandy's systems will take a bit more time. I'll be taking the team for another mission while we wait. Keep an eye on the Chief for me."

"Will do Commander, and good luck."

****XXxxXX****

John awoke to the sound of a dull thud rippling through the ship. The alarms began to blare of the systems intercom as the crew prepared to repel borders.

"Commander!" said Chakwas, "we're under attack. The Collectors are boarding the ship."

The Spartan grunted as he got off the bed, he gritted his teeth as his body cried in defiance.

"Where's Shepard?" he inquired.

"She and the team departed for a mission a few hours earlier."

"Okay, stay in the AI core room, Doctor," ordered John as he eased on his helmet, "I'll see what I can do."

Chakwas quickly ran to the AI core, while the Supersoldier checked his weapons on the adjacent bed. He was out of munitions for his firearms, but his energy blade was still functional. It'll have to do; the Normandy wasn't as spacious, which meant that John could use the short distances and his speed to his advantage.

The blade crackled to life as he left the room. A group of Collectors began to fire upon him, and even though he was unshielded, their rounds bounced harmlessly off his armour. The Spartan quickly closed the distance between him and the drones. He slashed the first one, from head down, bisecting it clean in half and destroying its weapons. He then side stepped grabbing a rifle and delivered a powerful side kick, sending another reeling end over end, and breaking against the dining table.

John could hear some of the crewmen scream, they were being overwhelmed as he moved towards the elevator. A Scion then rounded the corner and threw a biotic shockwave at the Spartan, but he was too close to doge the attack. He half expected to be thrown off his feet, but instead, the biotic energy simply dispersed around him. The Scion seemed to be gearing up for another attack, but the Supersoldier didn't let it have another chance as he rammed the blade deep into its head. The husk mutation squirmed for a split second as the plasma melted and burned through its hybrid flesh, before crumbling in a heap.

Yeoman Kelly Chambers was flailing and screaming as a Praetorian dragged her into the elevators. The Spartan quickly vaulted over her, and slammed the Praetorian with shocking forces, crushing some of its limbs in the process. As John pinned down the husk creation, his blade quickly burned through its head, putting it down instantly.

Chambers seemed to be gasping and heaving from shock.

"Yeoman Chambers," said the Chief, "are you okay."

"Y-yeah, I'm fine," she said, pulling herself together.

"Head to the AI core, Doctor Chakwas is waiting there."

"Okay, sure."

Just then, Hawthorne and Joker appeared from the life-support room.

"Oh man, am I glad to see you," said Joker, "I got to get the AI core, then down to the engine room."

"Very well, I'll keep you covered and the Collectors busy."

"C'mon Joker," urged Hawthorne.

More Collector Drones began to flood out from the cargo rooms.

"Go!" barked the Spartan as rounds began to impact all around him.

Due to the lightweight of the weapon, John wielded the assault rifle with one arm, and pulled the trigger. Accurate gunfire quickly devastated the boarding party, cutting them down in a few short seconds. He then doubled timed over and policed additional thermal clips, and ejected the spent one in the weapon's chamber.

John was alerted to footsteps moving down the corridor. He quickly popped out of cover, and unleashed another long hellish burst into their ranks. The speed and shock of his attack threw them off balance, making the stragglers, easy pickings.

"Commander One-one-seven," it was EDI, "I suggest you secure yourself, I will be venting the hold to clear out all hostiles."

"Copy that," said the Spartan as he secured himself on a bulkhead and engaged the magnetic soles.

The hull quickly vented out, John watched as the bodies of the Collectors he killed be sucked out like ragdolls into the emptiness of space.

Everything grew quiet again as the ship began to pressurize; now the long wait began for Shepard's return.

****XXxxXX****

When the rest of the team had returned, some of them were shocked, others weren't happy to say the least.

Joker sat on the briefing table, taking the brunt of Miranda's berating as she paced back and forth through the room.

"You lost just about everyone and damn near lost the ship too?"

"I know, all right? I was here," replied Joker, wracked with grief.

"It's not his fault Miranda," said Jacob, quickly coming to Joker's defence, "none of us caught it."

"Mr Taylor is correct," added EDI, "the harmful data in the Collector drive was even more sophisticated than the 'black box' Reaper viruses I was given."

"I heard it was a rough ride. How are you holding up?" asked Shepard, worried about Joker's condition.

"There's a lot of empty chairs in here. Would be more empty chairs if it wasn't for the Chief."

"We did everything we could, Jeff."

The Supersoldier quickly picked up on that, it was the first time EDI called Joker, Jeff.

"Yeah, thanks mom."

"Is the ship clean?" asked the Spectre, "we can't risk this happening again."

"EDI and I purged the systems. The Reaper IFF is online. We can go through the Omega-Four relay whenever you want."

"Don't even get me started about unshackling a damned AI," said Miranda with her arms crossed.

"What could I do against Collectors, break my arm at them?" snapped Joker, "EDI cleared the ship. She's all right."

John quickly noted Joker referred to EDI as she rather than it.

"I assure you, I am still bound by protocols in my programming. Even if I were not, you are my crewmates," said EDI.

"EDI has had plenty of opportunity to kill us," added Shepard, "we need all the help we can get."

"Sounds like we have everything we need to rescue the crew," said Jacob.

"We've done everything we can. It's time to take the fight to the Collectors," Miranda confirmed.

Shepard nodded, "Joker, head back up to the bridge. The rest of you, to your stations."

"Aye, aye, Commander," Joker saluted as he got off the table, "just punch up the galaxy map when you're ready."

The two Cerberus Operatives and Joker promptly left. Hawthorne and Kelly left a few moments later, after thanking the Spartan.

"Thanks John," said Jane.

The Spartan gave a curt nod, "couldn't save all of them though."

"You were still recovering when they came," said Chakwas, "there wasn't anything more you could've done."

****XXxxXX****

"_The Superior Adaptive Battle Rifle, or colloquially dubbed by our scientist as the Sabre, is the next generation of weapons to supersede the SCAR. The Sabre comes in two variants, Heavy and Light. Heavy Sabres will be issued to the Spartans, and Light Sabres will be issued to other Special Force branches."_

â€" LTCOL Dr Essingdon Keyes, presenting the SABR series to UNSC HIGCOM

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10. Unto Breach

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"_With the advancement in composite alloys, railguns are now available for widespread use without the fear of weapon degeneration."_

â€" LTCOL Dr Essingdon Keyes, on the overhaul of coilguns to railguns.

****XXxxXX****

NORMANDY SR-2****

The _Normandy_ wasn't due to arrive at the Omega Relay for another four hours, this had left the crew some ample alone time to do whatever they needed to do. Garrus was busy calibrating the ship's weapons, Jack was listening to her heavy metal music, Kasumi was combing through the greybox and so on.

John was sitting in the Osprey, deciding what weapons he should take with him. From previous experiences, he knew he would be running into a combination of lightly armoured to heavily armoured combatants on the Collector homeworld/base. He decided to go with the M702 LMG, and the Spartan Laser. Satisfied with his loadout, John attached his weapons to the magnetic plates on his armour before moving towards the CIC.

As the Chief stepped out of the elevator, he was greeted by the eerie quietness and the hum of machinery. Kelly stood at her post,

monitoring message terminals and doing other tasks assigned to her. He couldn't see Shepard anywhere, she was probably getting a few hours of shut eye before venturing into the lion's den.

"Excuse me sir," said Kelly, "but the Illusive Man wishes to speak with you in the debriefing room."

What the hell! The Spartan thought.

"I'll be there," he replied in his baritone voice.

John headed to the debriefing room via the tech lab, surprisingly; Mordin wasn't at his work station running tests. Though the Spartan had bigger concerns than worrying about where a genius Salarian might be.

The Chief wondered how the Illusive Man to get wind of him, and why it took so long. He had read the articles relating to Cerberus, and none of it was pleasant. Granted that ONI Section III was similar, both organisations' definition of '_the ends justify the means'_ differed greatly. ONI did what was necessary during desperate times. Cerberus just went overboard on just about everything, granted that bringing Shepard back was a good move on their part, it will never atone for the innocent lives they took.

As the doors parted upon, the table retracted into the floor allowing the Spartan to walk onto it. The glass began to creak as it took the weight of the armour. Orange gridlines and a low hum began to resonate throughout the room.

"Illusive Man," the Spartan said coldly as the Head of Cerberus appeared on the monitor.

"John, glad to finally meet you," he greeted _warmly_.

"We're not on a first name basis," the Chief growled. It was obvious that the Illusive Man had a couple of bugs on the Normandy that were not controlled by EDI or Miranda.

"Idealistic, just like Shepard," the Illusive Man chuckled.

"Get to the point."

"I appreciate you aiding Commander Shepard, but you know you can do so much more."

John instantly knew where this conversation was headed. The Illusive Man wished to recruit the Spartan. But the Supersoldier's loyalty lay with the UNSC, with the ideals it upheld. The Cerberus Leader sure had guts or was just a megalomaniac to try and recruit him.

"Go on," said John, humouring the Illusive Man.

"Join us, and humanity can benefit so much. Join us, so we can restore humanity to its former glory."

The Spartan was absolutely gobsmacked to put it lightly. The Illusive Man literally came out and said it. No dancing around toes, no political sway, just straight to the point.

"What do you mean, 'former glory'?" asked the Spartan.

"Think of what humanity could achieve with your technology, think of what we could do!"

Humanity, up on top, that sounded nice. Only there were many things wrong with that goal. Cerberus sounded like they wanted to dominate everything.

"You never answered my question."

"There was a missing blank in our history," began the Cerberus Leader, "historians said it was the Dark Age, I thought otherwise. And when news of a Supersoldier tearing through the galaxy began to emerge, I picked up on that."

"What if I refuse to join you?"

"Then you're failing every man, woman and child that has ever existed," the Illusive Man deadpanned.

"You'll do worse," John countered and flicked off the link. The less he had to deal with the Illusive Man, the better. That man reminded the Spartan of Colonel Ackerson, which made his skin crawl. No doubt that one day, the Illusive Man will be more than just an obstacle.

****XXxxXX****

****Omega 4 Relay, **_**Normandy sr-2**_**

Jane had just recently woken up, and from what Joker had told her, she wasn't in the greatest of moods. The Illusive Man had just tried to recruit John, the thought of a Supersoldier with Cerberus sent chills down her spine. However, she was pleased to know that the Spartan opted to stay clear from the pro-human splinter group.

"Ready?" the Spartan asked as he moved away from the galaxy map.

"More than ever."

****XXxxXX****

"_Based off the Rhino Tank, the M998A7 Ares Ultra-Heavy Tank is a six-tread armoured vehicle equipped with tri-barrelled cannon that is a railgun-ion canon hybrid. It is capable of firing ion lances and specialised munitions. The tank comes with dual energy shields, anti-missile systems and remote turrets."_

â€" General Thomas Irving

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****A/N: I know that was shortâ€¦ BUT, I wanted to get this out before my next dose of painkillers kick in.****

****XXxxxXX****

"_Walkers are extremely effective on terrain inaccessible by conventional means; their stomping grounds are in swamps, marshlands and alpine environments â€" no pun intended â€" however, with the improvement of close air-support, anti-gravity technology and multi-tread vehicles, the need for walkers has been negated."_

â€" _Doctor Eric Leven_

****XXxxxXX****

**Normandy SR-2**

"Shepard. I wish I had more information for you. I don't like you heading through that relay blind, but we don't have much choice," said the Illusive Man over the communications.

"I'll be fine," said Jane, still angered by the Cerberus Leader's earlier attempts at recruiting the Spartan.

"I knew we brought you back for a reason. I've never seen a better leader. Despite the dangers, it's a great opportunity. The first human to take a ship through, and survive."

"I'm going to destroy the Collectors," the Commander said, "to stop their attacks on humanity."

"Understood. It's still impressive. I just wanted you to know I appreciate the risk you're taking. Regardless of your opinion of Cerberus. Of me. You areâ€| a valuable asset. To all of humanity. Be careful Shepard."

â€|

Jane, John and Miranda stood behind Joker as his fingers danced across the console. This was _it_. They were going to go through the Omega 4 relay and hit the Collector homeworld.

"Approaching the Omega 4 relay," said Joker, "everyone stand by."

"Let's make it happen," Jane breathed.

"Reaper IFF activated. Signal acknowledged," said EDI.

"Commander?" it was Jacob over the COMs, "the drive core just lit up like a Christmas tree."

"Drive core electrical charge at critical levels."

"Rerouting," Joker said coolly as the _Normandy_ glided over. A deep eerie orange glow was cast upon it. Savage energy sparked from the relay and latched onto the ship, propelling her towards the Collector homeworld.

Enveloped in a blue mist, the stealth frigate was sent soaring across light years and into the galactic core.

"Brace for deceleration," said EDI as the Normandy reached its destination.

"Oh shit!" Joker yelled.

The blue mist disappeared, revealing a field of ancient debris, illuminated by the eerie orange glow.

Jane felt the ship shudder under her as the Flight Lieutenant pulled the ship into a sharp climb and out of the dangerous area.

"Too close," he sighed.

Shepard casted her gaze across the inert graveyard, everything was still, quiet and yet, strangely peaceful. She didn't like it at all.

"These must be all the ships that tried to make it through the Omega 4 relay. Some look ancient," Jeff commented.

Something just didn't seem right; all those ships had been gutted stem to stern by an energy weapon.

"I have detected an energy signature near the edge of the accretion disk," warned EDI.

"It has to be the Collector base," said Shepard as her eyes shifted towards the structure in the distance. "Take us in for a closer look. Nice and easy."

Joker pulled the Normandy closer to the debris field, just skimming over it. His eyes darted back and forth across the console before the sensor's alarm began to blare.

"Careful Jeff. We have company."

A squadron of Oculi probes manoeuvred behind the Normandy and began to open fire. Lances of red beams stabbed through the vast abyss in an attempt to gut the ship.

"Taking evasive manoeuvres," Joker gritted, "now they're just pissing me off."

Jeff managed to flank the Normandy's speed, causing the leading Oculi to fly past. The two probes exploded in a brilliant fireball as the ship's point-defence guns made quick work of them.

"EDI, take these bastards out!"

The ship shuddered again as an Oculus scored a direct hit.

"As long as the new plating holds," said Miranda, looking towards the source of the impact.

"They want another round? Come on girl, let's give it to them."

Joker pulled the Normandy into another dive, before spiralling back down into the debris field. A quick burst scored hits on the Oculi, but one managed to make it past the ship's fire and penetrate the

hull.

"Alert. Hull breach on the engineering deck."

"It's in the cargo hold!" Joker swore.

"Chief and I will deal with the intruder," said Shepard as she gestured towards John, "you get the rest of them off our tail."

"Aye, aye, Commander."

â€|

Compared to what John had soon during the first and second Human-Covenant War, the cargo hold was relatively fine. There were a few gaping holes that were still smouldering, but the force fields had kicked in to prevent decompression.

The Spartan quickly sprinted towards the Osprey and warmed up the dropship's guns.

"Shepard, draw its attention," said John over the COM.

The Oculus shifted into the hold and opened fire on the Spectre who had taken cover behind the console. Its crimson red beam began to melt through the display, causing Jane to move and return fire. She released a biotic warp, weakening its armour considerably before having to take cover again.

John entered in a couple of commands into the console, and brought up the chin mounted canons.

"Cover your ears, Shepard."

Jane obeyed and threw herself behind a turbine module as a deafening roar filled the air. She managed to see the outline of the Oculus right before it was ripped apart and engulfed in a blue fireball.

"We're sitting ducks out here," said Joker, "I have to lose them in the debris field!"

â€|

Jeff swore inwardly as he sent the Normandy plummeting through the floating graveyard. The remaining Oculi followed him, but some were destroyed upon impact against the heavily armoured hull sections.

"Our kinetic barriers are not designed to survive impact with debris that size Jeff."

"Then I guess it's a good thing we upgraded," Moreau retorted, "we're going in."

The Flight Lieutenant could feel the strain against his fragile bones as he put the ship through sharp turns and tight manoeuvres.

The sensors began to show a flurry of contacts as it scanned every

single object within range. However Jeff's attention was focused on the EM scanner as it showed the Oculi dwindling in numbers.

"Come on, find some room," Joker said to himself as huge chunk of debris scrapped itself across the _Normandy's_ shields.

"Kinetic barriers at forty per cent," said EDI.

"Reroute non-critical power!" Joker ordered, "this is gonna hurt!"

He could hear feel the dull thumps as numerous hull sections collided against the ship.

"Damage report!"

"Kinetic barriers steady at thirty per cent. No significant damage."

"Take the helm, EDI. Keep it slow. See if we can avoid any more attention."

The ship began to steady itself as it cleared the debris field. Jeff allowed himself a brief moment of respite as EDI took control.

â€|

"There it is," Miranda gestured, "the Collector base."

John took in the ominous sight of the structure, floating in front of the greatly contrasted background.

"See if you can find a place to land without drawing attention," said Shepard.

"Too late," sighed Joker as he read the console, "looks like they're sending out an old friend to greet us."

The massive Collector ship was a dwarf compared to the base it was leaving.

A gold lance of barbaric energy lashed across the abyss and shot over the _Normandy_. Joker shifted the ship in order to avoid the trailing fire.

"Time to show our new teeth. Fire the main gun," Shepard ordered.

The recently installed Thanix cannon extended out from beneath the ship. Blue wisps of energy collected at the barrel and shot forth.

"How do you like that you sons of bitches!" Joker taunted, raising his arms as the round burned through the Collector ship's hull.

"Maintain current distance," ordered John.

Joker shot a look of confusion at Shepard, who in turn nodded to tell

the Flight Lieutenant to obey the order.

"Got it," he replied.

"EDI, give me firing solutions to hit the Collector ship's main guns," said the Spartan.

"Solution acquired."

"Fire."

Another lance streaked towards the enemy ship and struck its mark. The charged up energy instantly dissipated throughout the Collector ship, causing its head to billow and blossom. The round burned straight into the main cavernous hold, creating a massive decompression. With the atmosphere being vented, the ship began to spin erratically.

"Hit it again."

This time, the Collector ship was gutted from front to back. Its superstructure having sustained too much damage began to collapse upon itself. Everyone watched as the fearsome ship began to tear itself apart.

"We're clear, now we can go in."

Jane couldn't help but smile at the Spartan's level of tactical ability, it seemed like he had done this before. Then again, she wasn't surprised due to his Positronic Brain implants.

The Normandy soared past the remains of the Collector ship and docked upon the Collector base's hull.

"How long until the Collectors find this landing zone?" Jane asked.

"I do not detect an internal security network. It is possible the Collectors did not expect anyone to reach the base," replied the AI, "I have also detected an atmosphere comparable to earth. Oxygen masks are not required for boarding."

"If we're lucky," added Joker, "their external sensors were hit like we were; they might not know we've survived."

â€|

Shepard walked into the debriefing room with John in tow. The two found the rest of the team waiting for them while preparing their gear.

"EDI, bring up your scans," ordered Jane.

An orange hologram of the Collector base flickered above the cracked glass of the table.

"You should be able to overload their critical systems if you get to the main control centre here."

"That means going through the heart of the station," frowned Jacob,

"right past this massive energy signature."

"That's the central chamber. If our crew or any of the colonists are alive, the Collectors are probably holding them in there," added Shepard.

"Resistance will be thick in that area," said John.

"It's not a fortress," pondered the Spectre as she leaned onto the table, "here, maybe we can send someone in through this ventilation shaft."

"Practically a suicide mission," Jacob stated, "I volunteer."

"I appreciate the thought, Jacob, but you couldn't shut down the security systems in time," said Miranda, "we need to send a tech expert."

"We could send the Chief here to do it, he can interface with any software," piped in Kasumi.

John just simply looked at her.

"No, we need the Chief's combat abilities to punch through their lines," Lawson countered.

"We volunteer for this task," said Legion, "this platform is capable of surviving extreme conditions that might be encountered in the ventilation shaft."

"Okay Legion, you can hack through anything, you're up," Jane nodded.

"Acknowledged."

"The rest of us will break into two teams and fight down each passage. That should draw the Collector's attention away from what you're doing."

"I'll lead the second fireteam, Shepard," said Miranda, "We'll meet up with you on the other side of the doors."

"Not so fast, Cheerleader," Jack interrupted, "nobody wants to take orders from you."

"This isn't a popularity contest! Lives are at stake. Shepard you need someone who can command loyalty through experience."

"Okay Chief, you'll be in charge of the second fireteam."

"Copy," the Spartan replied in his deep voice.

"Alright, let's do this people, stick together and check your targets, and we'll make it home."

****XXxxXX****

****THE ARK, Forbidden City****

"Subject's spine has been replaced by a titanium composite alloy; the

spinal cord has been regrown with stem cells," said Keyes into his log, "full recover is expected to be within three months after the subject has been fully revived."

â€|

Everything seemed cold; her spine was no longer on fire. Everything just seemed cold. As she opened her eyes, she was welcomed by the sight of a soft colour dÃ©cor. There was a window in front of her, spanning the full dimensions of the wall; it revealed to her a very familiar but alien sight.

There was a beach, to her left, a beautiful tropical beach. And to her right, there was a bustling metropolitan. It reminded her of the planet Strive, the planet second closest to Reach, and regarded as the most beautiful Human colony.

But as she looked up, she was greeted by a familiar face. He looked older now, that youthful appearance and aura that he once had, was now gone. She remembered how much younger he had looked when she returned home on shore leave. He just graduated from Grammar School back then. He and his friends were full of hopes and dreams when she saw them, but now, he looked like he had seen too much.

Everything began to feel warm again as he smiled, with a tear streaking down his cheek.

"Welcome back to the living, Miranda."

****XXxxXX****

"_The SR/F-78 Griffin is based off the legendary SR-71 Blackbird. With the advancement in technology, the Griffin is capable of slipspace jumps, atmospheric and space faring dogfights, and destroy targets of strategic importance, before the enemy knew it was there."_

â€" _Professor James Wrightwell_

****XXxxXX****

12. Finish the Fight

****XXxxXX****

****Collector base****

This was the first time John had set foot inside anything that was of Collector origin. He found the hive like structure, and the stark contrast within the ship to be unnervingly similar to the Flood. The dim lights and the oozing sound reminded the Spartan of his nightmarish encounter on Halo.

"Fan out," he ordered as the team pushed further into the base, "Solus centre, Massani left, Taylor right, Vakarian watch our six."

The men complied as the silently glided into their designated positions.

"Contact front," Zaeed warned.

John gestured his team to take up firing positions and allotted them a target vector. In mere seconds fifteen Collector blood and gore smeared the deck.

"This is almost too damn easy," said the former Blue Suns leader.

"Concentrating defences on Shepard, most probable," suggested Mordin.

"We'll have our fun soon enough," said the Turian, slapping in a fresh thermal clip into his weapon.

"On me," ordered the Spartan.

The group pushed towards their objective and soon found themselves standing on higher ground, above the entrance they were to get to. In unison, everyone opened fire at the horde of husks that threw themselves into the fray. The chorus of gunfire was quickly drowned out by the Spartan's LMG as it spooled up, and burned its way through the enemy ranks.

But for every husk that fell, four more came to trample over it. John primed a plasma grenade that Liara had been so kind to police from the dead Brutes, and hurled down the slope. Scores of husks were consumed in a dome of blue plasma, while many more were ripped apart by the shockwave.

"They're letting up," said Jacob, noticing the decline in enemy numbers as he melted the enemy with his Geth shotgun.

"Contact behind us!" yelled Garrus as he turned around and engaged the new threat.

John knew that the Collectors were trying to catch them in a vice. It was a tactic used by the Covenant so many times during the war, and the Spartan knew exactly how to get out.

"Taylor, Massani move down to the entrance."

"Got it, moving."

"Acknowledged."

****XXxxXX****

Shepard ducked behind cover as Harbinger unleashed a barrage of assaults on her position. She waited for the powerful projectile to impact, before rising from cover and sending biotic blasts back at him. The controlled Collector stumbled under the shocking force before burning up under a hail of fire.

The N7 Marine double timed to each control panel to allow Legion to advance, and open the main door up ahead. Jane fired a few more bursts at the pursuing forces to cover her team as they slid into the junction and behind the protection of metal slabs. A small sense of relief washed over her as she saw John's team move over to pour in

additional suppressive fire. Though Jane could swear that her hearing was damaged with the Spartan standing so close.

She watched as dozens of Collectors danced a deathly macabre or dropped like stones as rounds ripped through their arachnid like bodies.

"Nice work, Legion. I knew I could count on you." she gasped as the Geth slammed the doors shut.

"Shepard, over here," called out John.

Jane quickly jogged over to find the deck littered with shattered glass and the _Normandy_ crew.

"One of the colonists was processed before I could get her out," said the Spartan.

"Don't beat yourself up about it." said the Spectre as she helped Engineer Kenneth Donnelly, up.

"Thank you for coming, Commander," he said.

"No one gets left behind," Jane consoled.

"Thank god you got here in time. A few more seconds andâ€¦ I don't even want to think about it," breathed Engineer Gabriella Daniels.

"The colonists wereâ€¦ processed," paused Kenneth, "they were melted down into grey liquid and pumped through these tubes, up on the ceiling."

"Why are they doing this?" asked Jane, "what are they doing with our genetic material?"

"I don't know ma'am, I'm just glad you got here before it happened to us."

"So are we," said Miranda, "but we still have a job to do. We've done well so far. Let's hope we can finish the job."

"Joker? Can you get a fix on our position?" asked Shepard over the COM.

"Roger that, Commander. All those tubes lead into the main control room right above you. The route is blocked by a security door, but there's another chamber that runs parallel into the one you're in."

"I cannot recommend that," added EDI, "thermal emissions suggest that the chamber is overrun with seeker swarms. Mordin's countermeasures cannot protect you against so many at once."

"The seeker swarms, are they drones?" asked John.

"Yes," answered Solus.

"I can have my armour emit an EMP to disable them."

What? His armour can emit an EMP? Jane thought, but knowing time was of the essence, she decided to leave that issue for later. "No, EMP will fry our shields. How about biotics? Could we create a biotic field to keep them from getting near us?"

"Yes," answered Samara, "I think it may be possible. I wouldn't be able to protect everyone, but we might be able to get a small team through if they stayed close."

"I could do it to," Miranda added, "in theory, any biotic could handle it. Shepard, who do you want to maintain the field?"

"Samara and I will take a small team through the seeker swarms. The rest of you provide a diversion by going through the main passage. We'll open the security doors from the other side and meet you there."

"Who should lead the diversion team?"

"I'll do it," said John.

"Okay, Chief."

"What about us, ma'am?" asked Donnelly, "We're in no shape to fight."

"Commander," it was Joker, "we prepped and ready to go, but we'd need to land back from your position."

"We can't afford to go back, Shepard," Miranda said, "not now."

Shepard turned to face the crew again, "you'll never make it without help. I'll send Mordin with you."

"Acknowledged, Joker send LZ location, will meet you there."

"We've all got our assignments," Jane said, "let's move out."

****XXxxxXX****

The fight to the other entrance was undeniably tougher than the previous skirmish. Resistance was far heavier, forcing John and his team's progress to stagnate. Rounds peppered and crashed all around the Spartan as he attempted to knock out the Scions before they came into range.

"Scratch one!" yelled Garrus as scored a hit on a Collector. The alien jolted violently as its head exploded into a cloud of deep green and olive brown mist.

John lay down another barrage of suppressive fire before shouldering the M7. He let the capacitors warm up before a lance of blue energy splashed onto the lead Scion. The Spartan managed to see its outline for only a fraction of a second before it was consumed by intense heat.

Noticing the danger that the Supersoldier posed, the Collectors began to concentrate their efforts on him. The increased volume of fire

forced the Spartan back into cover, of course his shields could easily take the punishment, it wasn't going to undo decades of training.

He engaged the active camo and flanked around the enemy positions. Thinking that the Spartan was still at his former position, the Collectors continued to focus on the vacant area, leaving them vulnerable to the assaulting sharpshooters.

Moving to the back of the Scion formation, the Spartan activated his energy blade and rammed it into his closest opponent, before slashing another. Soft wisps of blue trailed behind the intense blade as it burned through synthetic flesh. John gave his silent thanks for the MJOLNIR's oxygen rebreather systems; it spared him from having to gag on the smell of ozone and burning meat.

The Chief unslung his LMG and fired a long burst into the exposed Collector position, literally cooking the occupants alive under the intense heat, and allowing his team to advance. With the counter reading zero, the Spartan ejected the spent cell, stowed it away to be recharged and slapped in a fresh one.

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After Samara had unleashed a powerful biotic blast, the seeker swarms dissipated, allowing Shepard and her team to move through the doors.

"Shepard, do you copy?" asked John over the COM channel, "we're at the doors."

"Copy, opening them now," the Spectre responded, "gets into position and open the door!"

Quickly, the team glided into position, with their weapons poised at the door. Kasumi's fingers danced along the console as she bypassed the security systems.

"Throwing a flashbang, watch your eyes!" barked John as his team poured through the opening.

The grenade went off with a brilliant flash, incapacitating the Collectors and causing a lull in the volume of fire. With the doors shut once more, Jane allowed herself a quick moment of respite before they pressed on.

"More are massing outside," the Spartan warned after checking his sensors.

"Got it. Joker, are you at the rendezvous point?" Jane asked.

"I'm here, Commander. The crew just showed up."

"Mordin's group just arrived, Shepard," EDI added, "no casualties."

"Excellent," Miranda smiled, "now let's make it count. EDI, what's our next step?"

"There should be some nearby platforms that will take you to the main

control console. From there you can overload the systems and destroy the base."

"Commander? You got a problem," Joker warned, "hostiles massing just outside the door. Won't be long until they bust through."

"Yeah, Chief just told me that," said Jane. She hopped onto a platform so that everyone could see her and worked her magic of inspiration, "A rearguard could defend this position and keep the Collectors from overwhelming us."

"Pick a team to go with you, Shepard," Miranda suggested, "everyone else can bunker down here and cover your back."

Jane decided to take the Spartan with her, and leave the rest of the team to cover their backs. Grunt didn't look too happy though. The young Krogan was really chomping for a chance to fight a good fight alongside Shepard. But she knew that his moment will come when the Reapers arrive. Right now, she needed the maximum number of guns cover her six, and the most suitable person for any unexpected encounters with her. Taking John and leaving the rest seemed like a good choice.

"Let's do this Chief."

The Spartan gave a curt nod as he effortlessly moved onto the platform.

"All right people, we know what's at stake here," Shepard began, "the Collectors and the Reapers are a threat to everything that exists today. That's the scale. It's been one hell of a ride, everything we've done, comes down to this moment. Let's give it all we've got."

â€

As the platform pulled away, Jane turned towards her enigmatic companion.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

Of course the Spartan was ready, he had endured decades of a nightmarish horror and came out on top. As arrogant as it was, the Collector base was really small time for him.

"You still owe me an explanation."

"I'll decide when to tell you."

The first wave of attackers appeared from the end of the cavernous tunnel. John rested the LMG's bipod atop his cover and began laying down a barrage of intense heat. A number of the Collectors were cut down instantly before they even had a chance to fight back.

Jane stayed close to the Spartan and lobbed a wide spectrum of biotic abilities to throw the enemy of balance. Dozens of Collectors floated above the chasm as the platforms moved out from under them. Some had the misfortune of being torn apart and thrown off the

edge.

Eventually, the counter attacks stopped, and the two moved up onto the next console. John crouched and took up a firing position to cover Shepard as she entered a few commands into the terminal. The platform hissed as it detached from the rest and began to move back the way it came in.

"This is it. All the tubes lead to this spot," said the Spectre, "EDI, what can you tell us? What are they doing?"

"The tubes are feeding into some kind of super-structure. It's emitting both organic and non-organic signatures. Given these readings, it must be massive."

John winced inwardly when he heard those words. It reminded him of things being twisted and repurposed. At the end of a tunnel, something menacing began to appear into the Spartans sight.

"Shepard, if my calculations are correct, the super-structure is a Reaper."

"Not just any Reaper," paused Jane, "a human Reaper."

"Precisely."

The platform whined as it connected to other stationary platforms, allowing Shepard and the Chief to move about more freely. A moderately pitched hissing noise drew both of their attentions to the glowing orange liquid flowing through the tube.

"It appeared the Collectors have processed tens of thousands of humans. Significantly more will be required to complete the Reaper."

The Spartan felt his skin crawl, this reminded him too much of the Flood.

"This thing is an abomination. EDI, how do we destroy it?" asked Jane.

"The large tubes injecting the fluid are a weak structural link. Destroying them should cause the support to collapse and the Reaper to fall."

In a heartbeat, John lined up his sights and destroyed the tubes. Jane appeared to be rubbing her right ear.

"Ouch, why does that thing have to be so damn loud?"

"Sorry," John apologised as they watched the Reaper fall into the chasm bellow.

But their little victory moment was cut short by a high pitched drone, it was another platform of reinforcements inbound.

One particular Collector caught the Spartan's attention. It was glowed a ghostly orange; its carapace seemed cracked, exposing

something fiery.

"That's Harbinger, if you're wondering," said Jane as she opened fire.

"A Supersoldier, something beyond the prime of a natural human," said the possessed Collector, "but even you cannot stop us. We are the Harbinger of your perfection. If I must tear you both apart, I will!"

John didn't wait for Harbinger to continue on his ramblings. The Spartan quickly zeroed in on the alien's head and sent a long burst down range and was rewarded with the sight of the Collector turning into ash.

Jane continued on with her style of fighting, which was harassing the enemy with her biotics, and then closed in for the kill. Countless of Collectors were thrown clear from the platform and fell into the chasm below. The sheer force of her attacks shattered their wings, preventing them any chance of flying back up.

Making sure that all hostiles were dead, the Spectre keyed her COM.

"Shepard to ground team. Status report."

"This is Thane," came the reply, nearly drowned out by sporadic gunfire, "we are holding, but they keep coming. A quick exit is preferable."

"Head to the Normandy," Jane ordered, "Joker, prep the engines. I'm about to overload this place and blow it sky high."

"Roger that, Commander."

Jane crouched next to a hidden panel and pulled it out from its socket. As John handed her the explosives, she overrode the safeguard protocols and placed the explosives carefully in. When they go off, it would cause a chain reaction and the system will overload.

"Let's move. We've got ten minutes before the reactor overloads and blows this whole station apart."

"Copy."

The panel retracted back into its socket and closed with a hiss. Satisfied with her handiwork, Jane was prepared to leave. However a massive vibration tore through the platform, causing her to stumble. The air was soon filled with a savage droning sound.

"Reaper-Human Larva is back," John said; he found the designation fitting for this abomination.

The two quickly threw themselves behind cover as energy collected within the Larva's mouth, and spewed it forth.

John switched to the Spartan Laser and aimed down its specialised sights. The Reaper-Human right eye was vaporised in an instant, the metal melted and glowed red hot while the stench of burning organic material quickly filled the air.

Shepard seemed to gag before refocusing, and lined up her Arc projector. She fired salvo after salvo into the Larva and watched as it was further weakened by the attacks of both heavy weapons.

Having sustained so much damage, the Reaper-Human looked like a parody of its former self. Scorch marks riddled its chest plates while smouldering holes riddled its head. The final killing stroke was delivered as the ion beam melted through the Larva's forehead, and a biotic blast ripped its chest. The Reaper-Human Larva fell back as its whole body seemed to catch alight, and gave a ghastly howl as it fell into the chasm, taking the part of the platform down with it as well.

The Spartan and Shepard lost their footing in the ensuing chaos and slid down the dying Larva's wake. John attempted to engage his magnetic boots, but the magnets were ineffective on the composite alloy deck.

As the abomination exploded, the shockwaves knocked everything to go the opposite direction. Jane managed to regain her balance in time before seeing another platform segment collide into the one she was standing on. Everything went black.

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John, having remained conscious throughout the ordeal, shielded Shepard from the raining debris. Once the platform had embedded itself next to an exit, the Spartan threw the unconscious Spectre over his shoulder and sprinted down the corridors towards the _Normandy_.

The Chief shot past small patrols of Collectors at terrifying speeds. Some were unlucky enough to have him charged straight through them, and crush them into delinquents.

"Commander?" it was Joker, "Commander, do you copy?"

"I'm here," responded John, "I've got Shepard with me. Has the ground team made it?"

"Yes sir, everyone's on board, we're just waiting for you guys."

"Okay, see you there."

â€|

Jane awoke to the feeling of air blasting her face and the sound of hellish gunfire peppering the area around her. She soon quickly noticed that she was slung over the shoulders of the Chief, covered in Collector gore, and moving at eighty kilometres per hour.

Shepard could see and hear the entire base fall apart, support structures collapsed by the dozens; explosions tore through the entire area. She prayed that John was fast enough to get them both to the safety.

Her heart jumped with joy as she saw the awaiting _Normandy_ and some of the ground team members, including Joker, providing cover fire for

the two Commanders.

John finally stopped running as he entered the ship and set Shepard down gently. He then turned to the Flight Lieutenant and gave a curt nod, "Punch it."

"Aye, aye sir."

The _Normandy_ sped away from the base as quickly as it possibly could. Jane watched as the superstructure collapse upon itself before going supernova and sending out a deadly shockwave.

****XXxxXX****

"Shepard, you're making a habit of costing me more than time and money," said the Illusive Man over the Quantum Entanglement Communicator.

"Costing you?" Jane guffawed, "Joker told me about why you called earlier. Too many lives were lost at that base. I'm not sorry it's gone."

"The first of many lives," rebutted the Cerberus Leader, "the technology of the Spartan and the base could have secured human dominance in the galaxy. Against the Reapers and beyond."

"Don't bring him into this," growled Jane, "you don't deserve either technology cache, you'll just use it for Cerberus dominance."

"Strength for Cerberus is strength for every human," said the Illusive Man to justify his stance.

"Bullshit!"

"Cerberus is humanity! I should have known you'd choke on the hard decisions. Too idealistic from the start!"

"Or maybe I'm rational, and you're not! What's the cost of using this technology?"

"The ends justify the means."

"That's a grey statement. All it says is how far you're willing to go to accomplish you're goals. You've gone too far decades ago; you'll never be able to atone for what you've done. I've done things my way, if you're not happy, then go cry me a river, but don't get in my way."

"Don't turn your back on me, Shepard! I made you. I brought you back from the dead."

"I don't owe you anything, but you owe humanity, everything."

With that final statement, Shepard cut the channel and her ties to Cerberus. She left the room with a small smile on her face, satisfied.

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13. Peace at Last

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"_The Scorpion has been the mainstay of UNSC Armoured Forces; it's cheap, manoeuvrable, tough, and provides excellent firepower. However, there's one thing it has been lacking in, and that's operational flexibility. Our engineers have designed another tank to supersede the Scorpion and Grizzly all together. The M99A1 Atlas MBT, it is heavier, bigger and faster. Moving at a top speed of eighty kilometres per hour, it is devastatingly powerful in armoured warfare." _

â€" _General Thomas Irving_

****XXxxXX****

****The Ark, New Manhattan****

Miranda lay in the soft bed in her brother's penthouse. She remembered the dreams she had while being in limbo between life and death. It was absolutely wonderful to be back with the living. From what her brother had told her, she was now outfitted with Positronic brain implants and an array of cybernetics that would accelerate her healing and thought process.

She had always been proud of her younger sibling; he had possessed a rare quality of kindness and sophistication ever since he could talk. Those traits would've been most likely been amplified during his time at Grammar School. However, during their short time together so far, Miranda could tell that Essingdon had aged considerably. He didn't look weathered like an elderly man, nor had the suppleness of youth; he seemed to carry a great burden within him.

Miranda could've only guessed what kind of hell her brother went through when he received news of his family's _death_. He would've been twenty-two years at the time, and completing his tertiary education. Don had really wanted to outdo his mother, and he had definitely succeeded. His primary skill set was administration, clandestine and science. It was a trinity of talents that caught the eyes of ONI. He was, in their opinion, the perfect operative to lead sensitive operations that involved unconventional warfare and sensitive objectives. Of course, Miranda didn't know he was ONI, not yet.

"How are things, Donnie?" asked Miranda.

Essingdon smiled softly at that nickname his sister gave him, "better, I guess, now that you're back."

"So what did I miss?"

"A lot," the scientist began, "when the war officially ended, it was a day of great relief. Everyone was happy; I was just content that it was over. I lost dad, mum, and you. The two people who kept me sane were Edmund and Fhajad."

"How is Edmund?"

"He's married to a very active and sweet woman, I'm very happy for him. He has two daughters and a son; they call me Unkie Don," he smiled, "and still do. It must be some running gag for them; they're already in their forties."

"Forties huh? I'm still finding it difficult about the whole; indefinite lifespan thing."

"We owe a life, Miranda, not a death. That's why I brought you and mum back."

"What happened to mom?" she asked, concerned.

"So when we thought we lost John and Cortana, we found the two again, a few years later, on Requiem, you'll be able to see the planet tonight. Shortly, we found out that mum and a few other Spartans were trapped in a shield world. Of course, I was very happy to have her back. Things began to look a bit brighter. I was going to revive you, but work just didn't allow it. Mum, I and teams of scientists began to work day and night reverse engineering Forerunner technology, which eventually paid off. On twenty-five, sixty-six, the Coalition-Covenant War began, the loyalists had resurfaced, and in greater strength. It was a pyrrhic victory in the end. We lost Earth, the Elites and hunters lost their colonies and homeworld. I lost mum in the evacuation, and all of Spartan Blue team died on Earth, including John."

"My god."

"Well, you get some rest now. I'll get you reinstated tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay, and thanks Donnie."

****XXxxXX****

Normandy SR-2****

She leaned back into the wall of her shower and let the water beat against her aching body, Collector gore was a pain to remove, but on the bright side, it didn't smell as bad.

There's always something weird about being on missions. Jane was so engrossed into her endeavour that now everything began to catch up to her. Weariness, fatigue, and an overwhelming sensation began to wash over her.

Shepard had gotten her team through the entire ordeal, without much loss. Most of the Normandy crew were accounted for, and everyone was happy. She guessed that was all she could really ask for. In truth, Jane didn't want to go through it again. But she was going to have to do it again. The Reapers were coming. Even though she stalled them at the Alpha Relay, they were by no means, stopped.

Jane would have to return to Earth to answer for it, she sacrificed a Batarian colony to save the galaxy, and working with Cerberus. But she wasn't go to go to Earth yet, her team deserved some R 'n' R, and a party.

****XXxxxXX****

"_Armoured walkers have a fear factor greater than tanks. Simulations have shown that walkers combined with adequate infantry support, are far more effective in urban situations than tanks or MAVs. We've noticed that in many scenarios, the less lifelike they are, the more fearsome they are," _

â€" _Professor Edmund Orton, countering Doctor Eric Leven's arguments about walkers_

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14. Clandestine

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"_CARNWENNAN Tactical Stealth Suit is the next generation of urban infiltration gear. Photo-reactive panels have been replaced by light bending technology and heat sinks to make the user completely invisible to all forms of detection. It is extremely light, allowing the user to operate on roof tops or in trees. Speed, mobility, and stealth are the core aspects of this suit; however the trade-off is that the suit does not provide the same level of protection as the MJOLNIR."_

â€" _GEN James Phillis_

â€|

"_M10G Pistol, M87R-S SMG and the EMBR-240 'Ember' are the newest editions to the UNSC's stealth arsenal, capable of firing specialised munitions." _

â€" _Dr Samuel Jason_

****XXxxxXX****

****Unspecified location, Asteroid field, 45AU from Coalition controlled space****

Three clandestine operatives glided silently into an airlock of a Pirate/Insurrectionist base. They moved like shadows through the dim areas of the station, easily bypassing security. Their objective was to destroy the life support systems and exfiltrate back into Coalition held space. The Pirates had been problematic for nearby mining operations, apparently during the evacuation of Earth, there had been hundreds if not thousands of "stowaway" ships that had piggy backed onto UNSC vessels that were entering slipstream space.

They then of course, dropped out of slipspace early, and established themselves in nearby Solar systems, and began to cause havoc for the Coalition. Once ONI had pinned their location, HIGHCOM dispatched a Carrier Battle group to deal with the threat. However, before they could deal the killing blow, the Pirates had taken a group of mining engineers and astrophysicists as hostages. This of course prompted ONI to send in one of their Deniable Ops teams, Fifth Element.

"Greysone, move up," ordered Arca over the COM.

"Copy," complied the agent as he prowled forward and swept the hallway through his gun sights.

"What do you see?"

"Three armed guards," Greystone whispered, "no way to go around them."

"Lotus, take out the guy on the left. Greystone, one on the right. I've got the middle one."

Two green lights winked in acknowledgement on Arca's HUD. Silently the team crept up on the unsuspecting group and unsheathed their wrist blades. The team leader twirled his melee weapon and held it in reverse grip as he rammed it into the guard's chest. The man's squirmed and his scream was muffled as the life slowly seeped away from his body.

Once they were sure that their targets were dead, they dragged the bodies out of sight and proceeded onwards.

The interior of the base was surprisingly, aesthetically pleasing, which prompted Lotus to comment. "You'd think a pirate base would look rundown. These people must make a lot on the black market."

"Resources from hijacked mining ships make a lot of credits," said Greystone.

As the moved deeper and deeper into the base, the number of personnel began to increase exponentially, which also meant that there were more consoles to hack into.

"Cover me, I'm tapping into their systems," said the team leader as he linked his tacpad and began to hack into the system, "okay, I'm in. I've got rosters and the hostages' location; they're keeping them in the city's control hub."

"It's going to be tough to get to it," said Greystone.

"Innies will cap 'em if we go all guns blazing," added Lotus.

"Well let's be quick, they're going to notice they're missing guard post soon enough," Arca said.

He engaged his visor's Short-Range Spectrum Optic Enhancements allowing him to see everything through the security hub. Upon spotting the exit, he tagged it with the team's nav marker.

"That's where we need to go."

Dodging patrols was particularly nerve-racking in the confined spaces, but thankfully, the stealth module was holding up. But there was a snag when they reached the steel double doors. There was no way they could open it without being compromised.

"We should've accessed by airlock," sighed Lotus.

"No, we're right on time," said Arca as he flicked through the roster, "a security team on D-wing is about to be relieved, by another team coming through this door."

Fifth Element slowly drifted into position making sure the guards had not detected their presence yet. Their patience was rewarded when the double doors hissed open allowing both parties to pass through.

Once clear of the security checkpoint, the team ducked into an alleyway.

Lotus whistled at the sight of the settlement, "ahh, the ol' 'hide in an asteroid at hope the Spartans don't find us' trick. Good to get back to the classics."

"Classics?" inquired Greystone.

"Infiltrating planet side basses was getting old."

"Quiet," ordered Arca as he swept the area with an array of optical settings, "we need to get to a vantage point. That building there seems suitable."

Slinging their suppressed weapons onto their backs, the team climbed onto the rooftops and began to free-run to their destination.

Making sure that they were in a secure location, Arca began to scout out the entire metropolitan area. As expected, the control hub was the largest but not the tallest building, and it was located in the city centre. Two hundred metre's to the buildings right wing, there was a skyscraper under construction.

"We can glide into the facility via the skyscraper over there," said Arca as he tagged its location for the team map, "one of us can provide sniper support while we get the hostages out."

"Let's do it," agreed Lotus.

They moved like ghosts over the obstacles, displaying speed, fluidity and agility beyond the normal human as the soared across the metropolitan. The populace below remained unaware of the UNSC presence. Many were retiring for the night, or preparing for a night out.

â€|

Dr Alicia Dalton and her colleagues were kept captive in a large room, overlooked by the command room and a mezzanine.

There were approximately fifteen guards armed with the ageing MA6F Plasma Assault Rifle. She knew those weapons were devastating at close to medium ranges, but performed poorly at long range. Dalton had learned that from her cousin who was in charge of her mining team's security. However, he was killed when defended her from some of the Innies who tried to make a move on her. She was by many definitions, a strikingly beautiful woman.

Alicia began to notice that something was wrong when the guards began to shift their weight from one foot to another. It seemed like they were either nervous or getting ready to pounce. The Doctor had a gut

feeling that the UNSC had made their response.

â€|

When they had arrived at the unfinished skyscraper, the men took the time to booby trap the elevators and fire escapes. From there, Greystone unpacked the Epirus Railgun Sniper Rifle, and let the weapon unfold and form itself.

"Greystone, Lotus, you two infiltrate the building and pull out the hostages, I'll cover you."

"Copy."

As Arca extended the grip pod for his Ember rifle, Greystone and Lotus began took a step back, before sprinting off the ledge. The two operatives soared through artificial night sky, their flight controlled by the manipulation of their shields and a low signature thruster pack.

Lotus was the first to land on the building, a trio of guards were sent crashing to the deck as hollow point rounds from Lotus's pistol slammed into their brains.

Next was Greystone, he quickly disengaged the glider system and rolled before taking a firing stance. His SMG coughed in quick successions, sending rounds down range and into soft targets.

"We're clear Arca." Lotus whispered into the TEAMCOM.

"Copy, scan for EM signatures and cut the power."

"Roger."

Lotus threw Greystone a couple of thermite packs as they began to search for electrical wires. The two men found a primary, secondary and tertiary power lines _buried_ underneath a feet of concrete and steel.

The idea of this situation was not to destroy the power plant, which would alert the entire Innies garrison, but rather, isolate the area and wipe it out before the enemy even knew it was gone.

"Charges set, preparing to breach," whispered Greystone as the two moved towards the windows below.

"Copy."

Arca switched the Long-Range Spectrum Optic Enhancer scope on. Intricate density scans allowed him to see everyone inside the building. The operative switched to Armour-Piercing Incendiary round and rested his finger on the trigger.

Greystone and Lotus began to pick the lock on the windows, upon hearing a satisfying click, they eased it open. The former switched to his SMG, while the later changed to the blade and pistol.

"Hey Greystone you know the time it takes for you to flick your safety off and shoot your two guys I could take our three?"

"With those?"

"Hidden blade and pistol"

"Not this argument again, guys," sighed Arca, "remember what happened last time?"

"Stay out of this!" Lotus and Greystone both said in unison.

"Okay, on my mark, three, two, one, mark!"

The two operatives squeezed the detonator, igniting the thermite and melting through the wires, severing them immediately.

Greystone and Lotus quickly rushed through the windows with their VISR engaged and adrenaline pumping through their veins. Red outlined hostiles lit up their HUDs, making them easy targets for the operatives.

Lotus quickly sprinted to his right, grabbed the first guard and slammed the blade into his chest. The operative let the body drop as he raised his pistol and took out another four Innies, sending brain and blood matter onto the stone tiles.

Greystone shifted left and took down his targets from a range as he moved behind the cover of a marble pillar. The operative shifted fire onto the lower levels while Lotus descended like a hawk, taking the fight up close and personal.

â€|

In an instant, the lights winked out, followed by the sound of men and bullets colliding, the cough of suppressed weapons, the crunch of concrete, and shattering glass.

When the quiet cacophony stopped, Alicia found herself looking at a man matte black and grey colour scheme armour. He wore Optic Enhancer Goggles over his left eye, which glowed a crimson red, furthering the fearsome qualities he possessed. His cobalt right eye was covered by a transparent visor, illuminated by a warm blue under glow. She could tell from his HUD that he was identifying all of the hostages.

"Dr Dalton, I'm Greystone, we're here to get you out?"

"Oh thank god," she sighed in relief.

"Were you harmed at all ma'am?"

"I-Iâ€| almost, my cousin, he died protecting me from the horny bastards."

"My condolences, ma'am, but we do need to move."

â€|

"I count five kills for me, and five kills for you," said Lotus.

"I call that a tie."

"Oh c'mon, keep dreaming, who killed the other six?"

"That was me," answered Arca, "and I also got the guys in the command room. I win again."

"Doesn't count," Lotus quipped, "you had the Epirus."

"Just because you can't use a sniper rifle," Greystone jibbed.

"For the record, I used only a pistol last time."

The operative made one last quick sweep to make sure there weren't going to be anymore nasty surprises before they exfiltrated.

"Goddamn it!" the team leader swore.

"Arca, how are we doing?"

"Bad, smart bastards must've placed a silently alarm, the entire garrison is forming a perimeter."

"Shit."

"We're going to have to fight our way out," said Lotus.

"Not quite, I'll pull their fire, and get them off you're back. Once they've shifted to me, make your way to these coordinates, the Greyhawk should be there waiting for you."

"Copy."

Arca remained perched in his position and began to fire upon the Innies with terrifying accuracy. He rolled back and forth between his two weapons to give the impression that there was a sniper team up inside the skyscraper.

The incendiary rounds from the Epirus Railgun made short work of the light vehicles. The specialised rounds bore through the thin armour plates and exploded, sending out a wave of shrapnel.

The Insurrectionists below attempted to make their way through to the building, but were mercilessly torn apart by the hyper velocity rounds. But when a sizeable force had broken through, they were once again halted by the pre-placed traps, immediately deterring them from advancing.

Inaccurate enemy fire splashed harmlessly onto the rebar, melting the metal and concrete slightly.

"Acra, you've got two Sparrowhawks and one Pelican inbound," warned Lotus.

"I'm on it," said the operative as he brought the Epirus to bear on the approaching aerial threat.

Arca zeroed in on the cockpit of the lead Sparrowhawk before it could fire and squeezed the trigger once. The windshield, or what was left of it, was splattered with blood as the bird began to lose altitude and crash. The second Sparrowhawk banked wildly, causing the

operative to miss. But he quickly rectified that error and scored a hit on the craft's left engine, causing it to spin out of control.

Finally, it the Pelican's turn came. Arca slapped in a fresh clip into the Epirus's receiver and unloaded the entire magazine into the dropship. The once workhorse of the UNSC began to cough and sputter as it lost altitude and crashed.

"Lotus, sitrep," barked Arca into the TEAMCOM.

"Greystone's driving makes me want to puke. The boffins looks like they're about to do the same," gasped Lotus, "but we're close to the docks if that's what you're asking."

"They're shooting at us, what do you want me to do? Stop at the red lights!" yelled Greystone.

The tempo of battle had clearly increased exponentially, causing them to become slightly testy.

"Shit, they're bringing in armour," cursed Arca as he saw a decommissioned Scorpion tank roll onto the street.

The operative quickly packed his weapons and leapt out of the building, unseen by the opposition.

â€|

Arca was relieved by the sight of an empty dock, and a squad of awaiting ODSs.

"Get on board sir."

"Let's get our asses out of here."

****XXxxXX****

****Citadel****

Shepard and her team were wearing casual dress or what they had closest to it. John seemed to be slightly uncomfortable having to go without his armour, and she wasn't surprised. Armour that was an extension of a person's body made a person feel safe and _better_, being without it made one feel naked.

Jane had decided to let the team loose and go wherever they wanted to goâ€| with sidearms only of course.

"Well, this'll be the first time in months since I had a good meal," said Shepard, "don't tell Gardener I said that."

"What's so bad about Gardner's food?" asked the Spartan.

Wow, he's actually keeping a conversation going.

"When was the last time you went on shore leave?"

"I've never had shore leave before."

"That explains it. You're use to military grade food."

That small shred of information gave a little more insight into the Chief. He had never been on shore leave, which meant whoever or whatever he was fighting, required a lot of resources to hold. Jane had no doubt that when the Reapers arrive, it'll be the same situation for everyone.

"I know a place near the Presidium; it's got a beautiful view, and wonderful food."

â€|

John followed Shepard to the cafÃ©, and like she said, it had a beautiful view of the Citadel, which reminded him of the Ark. The Spartan wasn't sure where the UNSC had decided to relocate, but it was most likely Installation 00. It was the most logical choice after all.

"The Asari cuisine they have here is excellent," suggested Jane.

"Sounds good, I'll try some then."

A human waitress quickly arrived, took their order and agreed to bring Shepard an iced latte.

"John, after this I have to go back to Earth," Jane began.

"Why?"

The Spectre took in a deep breath and pinched her nose as she told her story. "A few weeks before I picked you up, Admiral Hackett called. He said that there was an undercover operative deep in Batarian spaceâ€|"

The Spartan quickly recalled the article he had read on Batarians. Apparently they and humanity didn't have the best of political relations.

"â€| The operative's name was Doctor Amanda Kenson, she and her team had discovered a Reaper artifact that told them the Reapers would be arriving soon."

"How soon?"

"Less than a week. Hackett told me to go in alone and pull Kenson out. She took me to her base on an asteroid, where they were planning to send it into the nearby Relay to destroy it, and delay the Reapers. Unfortunatelyâ€|"

"â€|they were Indoctrinated," the Spartan interjected.

"Yes. I was knocked out, and when I came to, the Reapers were less than an hour away. I had to fight through the entire garrison and launched the base at the Relay. Only, I couldn't warn the Batarians in time. Hundreds of thousands of them died when the Relay exploded."

"That's why you have to go back to Earth."

Jane nodded lightly.

"I don't know how we're going to do this when the Reapers arrive. Look around you John, does the Galaxy look like they're able to fight the Reapers? We barely held our own against one Reaper."

John remembered that article about Sovereign; it had taken out dozens of ships as if they were commercial vessels. Combat records and weapon articles, had allowed the Spartan to come with the conclusion that Sovereign was as powerful as a Covenant warship of equal size. A 27th Century UNSC Carrier Strike group wouldn't have too much trouble when fighting a Reaper force of equal number.

The dish had a lovely tangy aroma; it was the best food John had ever eaten.

"What happens to me when we go back to Earth?" asked the Spartan.

That was a good question. During the time when Jane had picked up the Chief, it was out of the need for skilled personnel. Since Anderson and Hackett trusted Jane's judgement, they let the Spartan go with her. Everything seemed to work out for the best that way too.

"I'll talk to Hackett and Anderson, they'll know what to do, but right now," Jane sighed as she leaned back into her chair and cradled her beverage, "I don't want to focus on work. I want to relax, because this might be my last chance."

The Spectre drank the ice cold liquid, letting the flavour dance on her tongue, before cascading down her throat, bringing a calming sensation with it.

"Up for a game of chess, John?"

The Spartan was only too happy to play.

****XXxxXX****

****Ark, New Manhattan****

Miranda Keyes sat in the passenger seat of her brother's warthog as they drove down the highway. The familiar hum from the engines made her wonder why the UNSC hadn't prepped up to hover technology.

The warthog pulled away from the highway and turned onto an avenue that cut straight through the heart of the metropolitan area. It was a calm summer's noon, where the populace was out and having a good time, living their lives in happiness.

Eventually the two arrived at ONI Forbidden City. Donnie had to go through numerous security checkpoints before being granted access. He drove the vehicle over to the parking bay where he got out and eased Miranda into her wheel chair. Her spinal cord was still healing and she wouldn't have full functionality for at least another week.

As he pushed her into the main foyer, that was when people began to whisper, that was when they remembered Miranda's face. Everything was

about to change rapidly.

â€|

Catherine Halsey had enveloped her two children in a crushing hug. Tears of joy streaked down her cheeks as she laughed in pure bliss. Of course, she was very pissed and grateful towards her son from hiding and reviving Miranda without telling her.

"A full family again," smiled Cortana, "it's good to have you back ma'am."

"Likewise Cortana."

Overall Miranda seemed to be taking the massive change in scenery quite well. But that was mostly due to the fact that her mother and brother were still alive to support her. However it was slightly unnerving to her that Halsey looked about the same age, which meant that Donnie looked older than both of them.

Hood had also arrived upon hearing the miraculous news, though he shot Essingdon a look about the whole situation. It literally said _'why didn't you do it sooner?'_

"I believe a reinstatement is in order, sir," said Donnie.

"Of course," agreed Terrence, "but you really should have told me about this sooner."

"Parangosky," the scientist responded in his _defence_.

"You do have a point there," Hood concurred, "She's been a thorn in my side."

****XXxxXX****

****THE Ark, ONI Deniable Ops HQ****

Anthony "Arca", leader of Fifth Element, which was composed of his two closest friends, Brian "Greystone" and Bright "Lotus". The three were apart of ONI's Deniable Ops program, clandestine was the main thing on the agenda. Having received Spartan-IV augmentations, Fifth Element had been involved in countless operations against Pirate Organisations and Insurrectionists.

The three men were similar in appearance; they were of oriental descent, tall, lean and had luminous blue eyes from the augmentations.

Their equipment also reflected on their preferred style of combat, which were speed, precision and stealth. This meant that their armour was unconventional in terms of those issued to the Spartans. They wore the CARNWENNAN Tactical Stealth Suit, and there weapon loadouts was purely projectile based.

"You guys heard the news yet?" asked Anthony as he read a news article on his tablet.

"What news?" Brian responded, tearing his eyes away from the computer monitor to face his cousin.

"The Brass are organising a recon team to go back to Earth and see if we can go back."

"How big is the team?" asked Brian.

"Battalion strength of mechanised infantry, a platoon of ODSs a troop of Atlas Tanks, a squadron of Claymore Interceptors and one Nighthawk-class Stealth Cruiser."

"Wait," interrupted Bright, "so no Carrier Strike Group?"

"No, just recon," Anthony answered.

"Ha! Gayyyy!"

Brian just simply rolled his eyes; he was too far away from Bright to slap him.

"What? We don't know if the Covies are gone, and we're just going to go to Earth with a group not even close to CSG strength?"

Anthony was about to respond when the intercom system pinged the team. The team leader flicked the switch and patched the message through.

"Fifth Element here."

"Fifth Element, Admiral Parangosky wants you at the briefing hall in ten," said the dispatcher.

"Copy."

The link switched off, and everyone looked at each other. Usually when the Director of ONI called them, it was something big.

"I think it's safe to say that we're tagging along with the recon trip," commented Anthony.

As they were about to leave, Bright's ringtone began to flare.

"Who is it?" asked Brian.

"Pretty sure it's your sister," responded Bright as he checked the caller ID.

"Pretty sure? So you're the one she's dating?"

"Uh yeah," Bright breathed in sharply as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Brian just simply shook his head.

"You can be my best man our wedding."

"I call MC," smirked Anthony.

"You're not helping."

XXxxXX

****ONI briefing****

Parangosky always made the skin of her operatives crawl. She was, well, a very hard person to work for. She had green lighted so many questionable programs and operations that would have been detrimental, had Hood or Keyes not interfered.

ONI could be as compartmentalised as much as it wanted, but one way or the other, word leaked out within the organisation

Today, Fifth Element had the joy of meeting the Director of ONI, in person.

"Here comes the ice queen, oh wondrous joy," Bright said sarcastically, "not!"

"Belt up unless you want to the medics to pump your stomach," Brian said.

"Gentleman, good work on getting those scientists out," said the Director nonchalantly, "as you may have heard, there's a recon mission to Earth. I've put you on the mission to monitor everything. I expect full reports when you get back. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am."

****XXxxXX****

"_Light based weaponry, or Hard Light is the mainstay of all UNSC weapons, it is used complimentarily alongside Ion munitions. This allows our weapon to have high-kinetic and armour piercing characteristics." _

â€" _LTCOL Dr Essingdon Keyes_

â€|

"_The Dropship 89 Stealth-Troop Carrier/Infantry Greyhawk, is the smaller, faster and stealthier cousin of the Osprey. It is primarily designed for extracting and deploying airborne and Special Forces in regions behind enemy lines."_

â€" _Dr Delilah Orton_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Why did I create Fifth Element you ask? I felt that this Sci-fi story could use a Clandestine element.****

15. So it begins

****A/N: The long awaited chapterâ€| is now here! Welcome to the ME3 Arc.****

****XXxxXX****

"_The UNSC _Majestic_ is the first Omnipotence-class battleship. Classified as a Superdreadnought, she is the pride of the UNSC Navy.

Measuring at a length of one-hundred kilometres, she carries immense offensive and defensive capabilities, and would've taken us countless decades to build, had it not been for Ark's construction yards. Due to the lack of available manpower, we only have enough human resources for one ship to be in active service." _

â€" _Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, commissioning the UNSC _Majestic.

****XXxxXX****

****Earth****

Jane made sure that her team was dropped off safely before heading to Earth with Joker and the Chief. It felt all too surreal, knowing that the Reapers were close. She watched a small boy play on an apartment block not too far away from her, remembering the days when she was with her mother.

Shepard wondered how the Spartan was doing, last she heard, Hackett granted him safe passage back to Earth. She remembered him talking about finding a way to see if the UNSC was still alive.

"Commander," saluted Lieutenant James Vega as he entered Jane's room.

"You're not supposed to call me that anymore, James."

"No supposed to salute you either. We got to go, the Defence Committee wants to see you."

"Sounds important," said Shepard, tossing the pad onto her bed before following the Lieutenant out into the main hallway, "what's going on?"

There were officers everywhere, some even sprinting down the hallway.

"Couldn't say," answered Vega, "just told me they needed you, now."

Admiral Anderson stood at the end of the hallway, issuing orders to a Second Lieutenant.

"Anderson," greeted Jane.

"Admiral," saluted Vega.

"You look good Shepard," said the former Councillor shaking Jane's hand and trying to brighten the mood, "maybe a little soft around the edges."

He gestured towards her stomach, prompting her to see if she gained a little weight.

"How are you holding out since being relieved from duty?"

"It's not so bad once you get use to the hot foods and soft beds."

"We'll get it sort it out."

"What's going on?" asked Shepard, slightly concerned, "why is everyone in such a hurry?"

"Admiral Hackett's mobilising the fleets, I'm guessing word made it to Alliance Command, something big is headed our way."

"The Reapers?" asked Jane as she stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

"We don't know," said Anderson, "not for certain."

"What else could it be?"

"If I knew thatâ€¦"

"You know we're not ready if it is them, not by a long shot."

"Tell that to the Defence Committee. Our friend is in their giving them what hope he can."

John is in their? He doesn't even talk that much, what's he telling the Committee? Jane thought.

"Unless we're planning to talk the Reapers to death, the Committee is a waste of time."

"They're just scared, none of them have seen what you've seen. You faced down a Reaper, hell you spoke to one then blew the damn thing up. You've seen how they harvest us, what they plan to do to us. You know more about this enemy than anyone."

"That why the grounded me? Took away my ship?"

"You know that's not true," Anderson said, shaking his head, "when you blew up the Relay, hundreds of thousands of Batarians died."

"It was that or let the Reapers walk through our back door," said Shepard sternly, justifying her actions.

"I know that Shepard," Anderson said in a low voice, "and so does the Committee. If it wasn't for that, you would've been court martialled and left to rot in the brig."

"That and your good word."

"Yeah, I trust you Shepard," the Admiral said in a fatherly tone, "and so does the Committee."

"I'm just a soldier Anderson, I'm no politician."

"I don't need you to be either. I just need you to do whatever the hell it takes to stop the Reapers."

Dual-glass doors parted ahead, letting the small entourage enter an office.

"They're expecting you two, Admiral," said a female Alliance officer, and led them through the security checkpoint.

"Good luck in there Shepard," said Vega. Jane turned around to shake his hand, a sign of camaraderie.

"Anderson," Ashley Williams greeted as she walked over to them, "Shepard."

"Ashley?" asked Jane as she turned around, surprised to see her friend.

"Lieutenant Commander, how'd it go in there?"

"I can never tell with them," Williams sighed, "hard to know, One-one-seven is keeping them busy. Just waiting for orders now."

"Lieutenant Commander?" asked Jane.

"You hadn't heard?" asked Anderson.

"No, I hadn't."

"Admiral," urged the earlier Alliance officer.

"Come one," said Anderson as he led Jane away.

"You know the Commander?" asked Vega as he moved up closer.

"I used to."

****XXxxXX****

****The Ark****

Reversed engineered from the Forerunner Fortress-class vessel to suit Human requirements, the Omnipotence-class measured 100km in length, and had a wingspan of 90km. Its shape was quite similar to a Scottish Claymore; the main body was an octagonal prism 10km in width. The front was in the shape of an octagonal cone which splits open to fire the main Super Ion Canon.

The wings were 40kms wide, and stretched to half the length of the ship; they lay at a thirty degree angle of depression. Each wing was mounted with hidden plasma missile pods, dual Ion cannons turrets, point-defence guns and engines. Each Ion cannon had the firepower of a Super MAC, making the Omnipotence-class capable of taking on entire fleets. All the weapons had been aligned in a neat and orderly fashion, allowing them the maximum possible firing vectors.

Miranda had noticed a new style of design amongst all UNSC ships; they were sleeker and possessed wings. The purpose of the wings was for the engines and additional guns to be mounted on, thus leaving more room in the main hull. This also meant that additional fire power could be aimed forward, thus increasing the effectiveness of a wedge formation.

Miranda felt a sense of great awe as she stepped into the hangar bay of Majestic. Hundreds of armoured vehicles and aircrafts lined the aisles of the ship as maintenance crews ran their daily routine.

She had been given directions to go to the Assembly hall, where the meeting would soon commence. As she got closer to the destination, the Keyes could feel the excitement resound throughout the white hallways.

The dual doors parted open with a soft click, idle chatter stopped immediately as she entered.

"Officer on deck!" barked an ODSI Lieutenant, snapping a crisp salute.

"At ease," Miranda said.

They spared no expense into making the room aesthetically pleasing. It looked like a high-end commercial conference room, with its oak panels and angular ceilings. She spotted a vacant seat next to her brother, near the stage and decided to sit there.

"Excited?" Miranda asked.

"Very. Shame you're not tagging along," answered Essington.

"Well, mom wants to spend time with me."

"What are you guys going to do?"

"Shopping, maybe take a vacation in New Hawaii."

"Vacation?" asked Donnie incredulously, "you've been asleep for the past thousand years."

"Yeah, but the last thing I remember, was being under extreme stress because some ballachinian was about to destroy us all."

"Ah, Men in Black reference," chuckled Donnie, "well take pictures. I haven't been on vacation since, well I don't remember, probably because I never had one."

Although that was a light hearted comment, it did sting a little. Miranda wondered how much time and effort her brother gave to the UNSC. The poor fellow probably never had his first kiss before.

"So, I heard that they're going to be only one ship going back to Earth," frowned Miranda, "why don't they send a Carrier Strike Group, or a Battle Group."

"It's a Stealth mission; we don't know what's on the other side. Blame the inconsiderate bureaucrat."

Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood took a stand at the podium, and began to address the audience.

"Ladies, and gentlemen, as you may have heard, we are sending recon missions to Earth, and other former Coalition colonies. We have seen during the war, that the Covenant possessed very powerful sensors that detect anything of Forerunner origin, because of this, we have decided to send out one stealth corvette per colony and one stealth cruiser to Earth."

"Looks like you're going to have to form a vanguard," whispered

Miranda, "why did they pick you anyway?"

"Because, I'm the chief analyst," Donnie said.

"All stealth elements are to cease radio contact until they have verified that there are no hostile elements within the system. This is estimated to take about a month. Should a hostile element be discovered, it's you're call whether to engage or not. If there is no hostile element, contact us immediately. If we do not receive word from you, we send in a Carrier Strike Group to assist, and in the worst case scenario, a battle group. Any questions?"

No one raised their hands, everything was clear.

"Okay, dismissed, you leave in two weeks."

About midway through the presentation, Fhajad had appeared, with a pipe in hand. He was going to be the leader of the ground forces throughout the operation. He had also brought with him, Fifth Element.

"Essingdon, good to see you again," said Anthony.

"It's been too long," Keyes greeted, shaking his hand.

"Looks like we'll be riding shotgun with you, just like old times."

"Just like old times," Don smiled.

The group departed for lunch, where Essingdon could catch up with his old friend. The two had gone to the same Grammar school where they both performed at high levels in their fields. Anthony specialised in human resources and psychology which made him an excellent leader and analyst in the field.

Miranda had met Anthony on a number of occasions; he had proved himself to be a very loyal and caring friend to Essingdon. She was thankful for him being around; he certainly would have played a role in keeping her brother calm.

However she kept noticing a certain trait amongst those who worked alongside Donnie. They looked old, but not weathered and battered. Their skin was smooth and devoid of wrinkles, but lacked the suppleness of youth. Miranda had seen these traits enough to know, that these men have seen enough to haunt them for all eternity.

"Lunch is on me," said Fhajad as they arrived at the cafeteria, "what do you guys want?"

"I thought it was my turn to pay," said Bright.

"You paid for the drinks last time," said Brian.

Luxury is a seldom trait in many military vessels, so Miranda was very surprised to see a beautifully decorated food court, surrounded by a lusciously green scenery, a lake and a river, in one of the UNSC largest ships. The expansive balcony overlooked a golf course, and perched high up on the side of the valleys were common rooms and

living quarters. The area practically mirrored a country club and the view seemed to stretch on forever. Clearly, the background was a simulated environment, but it was still greatly appreciated. No doubt there would be more similar areas like this throughout the entire ship.

Once the group had finished their meals, which was also surprisingly good, most of them left to play golf, leaving Anthony and Miranda at the table to enjoy their cold beverages.

"So why does this ship have vistas on it?" asked Miranda.

"It's too keep the crew calm and relaxed," Anthony answered as he drank his taro milk tea, "notice how it spreads to both widths of the hull?"

"Yeah."

"Should the ship be boarded, this place will act as a choke point."

"So are they all themed like this? Or different."

"There's a few more country clubs, a forest, beach and a park. The river you see runs throughout the entire ship. It's mainly for rowers."

"Seems a bit expensive."

"It would've been, but the sentinels do really help cut back on military production costs."

Miranda took another sip of her mango smoothie before asking a question related to her brother.

"So what does Donnie do exactly, you guys look too old to be just soldiers and analysts."

"We're ONI," Anthony whispered. It wasn't classified information, just something best kept hidden.

"Oh," said Miranda, clearly taken back.

****XXxxXX****

****Earth****

Under Hackett's orders, John had been allowed safe passage into Alliance HQ. They needed him and his experience. There was something big coming up on the long range scanners; the Defence Committee was becoming desperate, and was looking for anything they could cling too.

The Defence Committee meeting chambers was too exposed for the Spartan's liking. When the UNSC Top Brass met, it was normally under a mile of rock and six inches of reinforced armour. Here, a sniper with a high powered sniper rifle could probably take out a couple of officers before having to bang out. The chamber had ceiling high windows that overlooked a vast metropolitan area, which caused some concerns relating security.

"â€¦ that's the short version of our history," said John finishing off his presentation.

Around this time, Jane and Anderson entered.

"Admiral Anderson, Shepard," said one of the Committee members.

"What's the situation?" asked Jane.

"We were hoping you could tell us."

"The reports coming in are unlike anything we've ever seen," said an elderly woman, "whole colonies have gone dark, we've lost contact with everything beyond the Sol Relay. One-one-seven here says it's the Reapers."

"Whatever this thing is, it's incomprehensibly powerful."

"The Chief here has confirmed what you already know; you've brought me here for the same reasons," said Jane, "The Reapers are here."

At that moment, all activities ceased in the room, servicemen and officers alike stopped to listen.

"Then how do we stop them?"

"Stop them?" Jane said, shaking her head, "this isn't about strategy or tactics, this is about survival. The Reapers are more advanced than we are, more powerful, more intelligent. They don't fear us, and they'll never take pity on us."

"But, there must be some way."

"If we're going to have any chance at surviving this, we have to stand together."

"That's it?" asked the Admiral sitting in the middle, "that's our plan?"

"Your weapons are incapable of breaching Reaper defences," said John, "if you can make a weapon that can deliver sixty-eight kilotons of kinetic energy, then you may have a chance."

"Our best weapons barely produce half that much," said a Councilman, "what makes you think that could punch through the Reaper defences?"

"Ship to ship, a Reaper would be similar in strength to a Covenant ship of equal size. UNSC ships fired rounds that were capable of delivering that much force with one round. Three rounds is all it takes to neutralise the shields and penetrate the armour."

The Spartan's story raised more questions than it answered, but now was not the time to go into a full history lesson.

"Admiral, we lost contact with Luna base," said an officer

"The moon! They couldn't be that close already." asked

Anderson.

"How'd they get past our defences?"

"Sir, UK Headquarters has a visual."

The video feed was filled with static, everyone in the room felt fear and dread clench their heart.

"We're under attack!" yelled the Commanding Officer, "hostiles overwhelming ourâ€|"

The link was immediately lost.

Everyone began to realise the full situation. Murmurs began to spread as news reports began to flood through. Satellite networks and Ariel drones sent live visual feed of the Reapers attacking London and descending through the Earth's atmosphere.

"Why haven't we heard from Admiral Hackett?" asked Anderson.

"What do we do?" a Councilman asked Shepard.

"The only thing we can," Jane responded as she pointed to the screen, "We fight or we die!"

"We should get to the Normandy," Anderson spoke to the Spectre.

But before anyone moved, a low droning hum filled the skies, everyone looked up.

The Committee stood and moved towards the window as violet streaks of light stabbed through the clouds.

"Oh my god!"

A Reaper descended over the metropolitan sector and immediately, began to open fire.

"Move!" Jane yelled as the crimson beam zeroed in on the building.

The Committee was immediately killed in the blast as their table was hurled into towards Shepard.

John immediately threw himself in front of her and activated his hard-light shield. An immense shockwave cascaded over him, instantly overloading the shield.

The room was in flames when the Reapers passed. Jane and Anderson were relatively fine since the Spartan took most of the hit.

"Shepard, take this," said the Admiral as he handed her a standard issue pistol. John handed her one of his spare M7SCs as they moved away from the room.

"This is Admiral Anderson, report inâ€| anyone? Lieutenant Commander Williams, is that you? What's your status?"

Jane quickly jogged over to see if there were any survivors, one of the Committee member's body was charred by the extreme heat.

"He's gone," said John, scanning the room with his suits sensors.

"I can't raise the Normandy," the Admiral said over the COM, "you'll have to contact them. We'll meet you at the landing zone. Anderson out."

The group moved to the edge of the room and saw hundreds of burning objects fall through the sky, with smoke trailing their wake. A couple of Reapers had established themselves in the metropolitan area, tearing apart at anything with their main guns.

****XXxxXX****

****Slipstream space, SOL, near Earth, UNSC **_**Watchful
Eye**_**

"Entering normal space in five minutes," said the crewman, "stealth systems online."

Keyes could feel the tension in the air, everyone was anxious to see how Earth was. After a thousand years, they were going to lay eyes for the first time, on their home planet. The place where it all began.

Donnie slowed his breathing down to keep his heart rate in control; he slowly downed the contents of his coffee mug as everyone made preparations. Part of him expected a beautiful green-blue planet marred by angry but healed scars. Yet the other, felt that a blackened ash choked planet, engulfed in a winter storm was all that remained.

"What the hell is that?" breathed Captain Eli Redmond.

The portal opened and revealed a pristine Earth, under attack. Hundreds if not thousands of arrange streaks slashed across the blue planet's sky. The entire bridge fell silently as they tried to comprehend what was going on.

But the alarms began to blare, it signalled an imminent collision. The crew exploded in a flurry of motions in response.

"We have a ship, unknown classification, on a collision course!"

That was the last thing Keyes heard before a shockwave ripped through the entire ship. Crewmen were knocked out of their seats or lost their footing as a two kilometre long Cuttlefish shaped vessel slammed into the Nighthawk. Both ships took immense damage and plummeted towards the Earth.

The one kilometre long Stealth Cruiser was thrown well of trajectory.

"We're losing control!" yelled an Ensign.

"Engines are unresponsive!"

The cruiser began to drop like a stone and into Earth's atmosphere.

"Watch out!" yelled a Lieutenant.

The Watchful Eye had been thrown into another collision course with a different hostile ship. The cruiser slammed into the other craft splitting the unknown vessel open. Spiralling out of control to the Earth's surface, the hull began to heat up on entry. Redmond immediately issued evacuation orders.

â€

"What the hell is going on!" yelled Lotus as Fifth Element sprinted in full gear towards the hangar bay, or what was left of it.

"We've been hit," answered Greystone.

"I can see that genius."

"Shut up you two, and follow me!" Arca ordered.

It was hard to move in a vessel that was constantly shifting acceleration, but it was something they were no stranger to.

"Do you have all you're gear?" the team leader asked over the COM.

Green acknowledgement lights winked out.

"Watch for falling pipes!"

The entire run was like something out of a video game, where the protagonist had to run through an area that was literally falling apart. Truth be told, it was not exiting, it was plain stressful.

"Move right!"

Fifth Element rounded the corner and past the life boats as non-combat personnel headed abandoned the ship.

"Why can't we hitch a ride in air conditioned comfort?" asked an annoyed Lotus.

"Because we're not payed to sip wine and eat appetisers," quipped Greystone.

The men arrived at the hangar bay and found that all the mechanised infantry were already being deployed, and that the fighters had already departed.

Arca signalled over a platoon of Helljumpers and addressed them immediately.

"You guys, stay close, we need to get off as fast as we can!"

The ODSs nodded and formed a single file behind Fifth Element. Arca slammed opened the hatch and let the cold air blast him as he glided

through the sky.

It was quite a spectacular sight, watching 53 soldiers glide in perfect formation, bypassing the airdropped Atlas tanks.

"Shit, I didn't think there would be anyone here," said Lotus as he took in the sight of the war-torn metropolitan.

"Me neither," said Arca, "I didn't think that many people were left behind in the evacuation."

"So what's the plan?" asked the Lieutenant Alison Devonshire, leader of the ODS1 1st Platoon.

"Get groundside, avoid the Cuttlefish bastards and link up with other survivors," answered Arca.

"What if we run into native military forces?"

"Their choice!"

The Watchful Eye streaked overhead, leaving behind a trail of smoke and debris in its wake. The stealth cruiser began to lose altitude rapidly and smash through dozens of buildings. Finally it came to a grinding halt after carving a massive trench through a park.

Arca tagged the location of the crash site on his HUD and radioed the coordinates to everyone.

"Crash site's in a massive park, that's where we're going people."

The team made landfall just outside the CBD, they were in the suburbs, which would also mean that the five Atlas tanks landed nearby.

"To all UNSC Forces, this is Fifth Element and Theta Platoon. Is anyone out there?" Arca keyed into the COM.

"This is Orca Squadron," answered the flight of Claymore Interceptors, "we're doing a flyby around the city, sending you map scans now."

As the Scottish Claymore shaped jet soared by, it uploaded the map of the entire area. Mapping sensors have become widespread in all UNSC Airborne vehicles, the idea behind it all was to make all fast movers; sensors.

"Steel Troop here, all five tanks and two MAVs accounted for, we're linking up with second company and moving towards the crash site."

"This Lieutenant Commander Fhajad, I'm with first company, we've just finished rescuing all the survivors from the lifeboats and are moving towards crash site."

"Lieutenant Colonel Keyes here, third company and I are almost at the crash site. We've just picked up a few civilians."

"Captain Eli Redmond here, I'm with Super-Five Osprey squadron, we're

moving towards the crash site."

"Copy, meet you all there."

Fifth Element and Theta Company moved in a loose formation, carefully combing through the streets.

"Damn squids," cursed Lotus as he saw another unconventionally designed ship bringing down another skyscraper.

"Where are all the civvies?" wondered Devonshire.

"Probably killed or evacuated," answered Arca.

Deciding to remain in cover for the duration of the trek, Arca had decided to lead them under the highway; he could see native aircraft fighters and transports being shot down by the squids. Deep down, he knew there weren't going to be many who could escape from this.

"I think I know where some of the civvies are," said Greystone and he peered down the scope of his Ember rifle, "tagging position."

"Shit," said Arca.

Thousands of people lay lifeless in the distance, impaled by large poles.

"I'm calling in an airstrike. That could be very demoralising if we leave it standing there."

"I think flying squids are demoralising enough," said Lotus.

"Orca, we're lasing a target for you," said Arca into the COM.

"Copy that Arca, might take a bit, we're engaging enemy fighters."

"Take your time."

The team continued on their journey, a few minutes later, the Orcas roared in and released a thermobaric charge. The missile streaked in and engulfed the baseball pitch in a raging ball of fire. The resulting shockwave shattered the nearby windows and stripped trees of its leaves while flattening the lesser ones.

"I love a big boom," smiled Lotus.

The sector of the metropolitan Arca moved through was littered with corpses, rubble and debris. One vehicle appeared to be military; it said Alliance on the side.

"Greystone, check it out," the team leader gestured.

"Copy."

The operative shouldered his Ember rifle and approached the vehicle while the rest of the group took up firing positions. Easing the door open, Greystone peered inside, the driver, or pilot, was slumped over the console, and in the hold was a dead family. The Spartan-IV was

about to leave when he heard the whimpers of a girl.

"Hey, you're safe. You can come out."

"I can't, my chest hurts," the girl said softly.

Greystone swore silently to himself as he flicked on his helmet flashlight.

"Arca," the operative keyed into his COM, "we've got a wounded girl here, eight years old most likely."

"Copy, moving in."

Arca waved Devonshire to follow him into the vehicle, it was large enough for all of them to easily stand inside.

"Greystone, cover us. Lieutenant, I need you to talk to this girl in the most caring and motherly tone as you possibly can," said Arca as he eased off his helmet and prepared his gear, "get your medics to set up a stretcher."

"Got it."

Devonshire had dealt with many wounded children before, and knew how uplifting it was for them to see a human face. She popped her helmet seals and rested it on the seat as a couple of her medics moved in to clear the bodies.

Alison brushed aside a lock of her brown hair and spoke to the wide eyed child.

"What's your name sweetie?"

"Emily."

"Last name?"

"Johnson. Where's mom?"

"She's outside being treated by the doctor," Arca lied, seeing the Lieutenant's hesitation.

The operative scanned the girl's body with an ultrasound device on his tacpad.

"Three fracture ribs and internal bruising, you took quite a tumble there."

Parents must've taken the hit for her.

"You're going to be okay," said Alison softly, "how old are you?"

"I'm turning nine today," the girl said.

Shit day for a birthday, Arca thought as he made adjustments to the dosage of pseudomorphine he was going to inject her with.

"Okay, the doctor here will give you something that will make you

feel better."

"I don't like needles," Emily whimpered.

"Don't look then sweetie, just look at me."

The girl gazed into the Lieutenant's ice blue eyes as the painkillers entered her blood stream.

"Now that wasn't so bad now was it?"

"Okay, we can get her out now."

Arca gently lifted the young girl into the stretcher, allowing the medics to carry her out. The operative and the Lieutenant eased their helmets back on again before heading out. Arca took the lead and moved in front of the formation. They had barely moved three metres when they were stopped again.

"Help!" screamed a young woman, "help me!"

She appeared to be in her early twenties, and wearing summer athletic attire. The brunette looked battered and bruised as she crashed into Arca's arms.

"Oh god, help me!" she cried.

The team leader quickly motioned the men to take up firing positions. The howl from the Opfor made the woman back further and further away from the alley as possible. A horde of blue humanoid creatures came into sight, driven by pure primal desire

"Open fire!" Arca barked.

Assault rifles roared as energy lances speared forth and burned through the enemy ranks. The creatures howled as their limbs were torn from their bodies, oozing out a milky blue liquid.

"The fuck are those things?" yelled a Helljumper.

"Keep firing!" ordered another.

When everything grew quiet again, Arca and Greystone slowly approached one of the humanoids. The leader of Fifth Element crouched over the corpse as he prodded it with the barrel of his Ember rifle.

"Looks to be cyborg, insides seemed to be filled with tech," Arca examined.

"Reminds of the Flood," said Greystone, "but one's blue and the other is green."

"And these things go down easier," said Lotus gesturing to the alley littered with these blue bodies.

Arca then turned to the young woman who had managed to regain herself.

"Here, drink this ma'am," the operative said as he offered her a

juice box, "it'll take the edge of the shock."

"Thank you."

"What's your name?"

"Amanda Johnson."

"Amanda, do you know anyone named Emily?"

"My little sister?" she said, her eyes filled with hope.

"Follow me then."

The two girls cried with delight as they met each other again.

"Thank you so much," said Amanda happily.

"Can you tell me what happened here?" asked Arca, trying to make much sense of the situation as possible.

"I was playing at a tennis competition, my family came to watch. Then next thing I knew, Alliance soldiers came in, and evacuated us," her voice began to grow hoarse as tears streamed down her face, "these things, these ships called Reapers. I thought they were just a myth. They came down and started shooting everything. My family got onto one of the evac shuttles, but there was no room for me so I had to wait. The shuttle was hit and it went down. Next thing I knew, the evac site was being swarmed by husks. They kept on howling, tearing everyone apart. I ran away as fast as I could."

Around this time, Steel Troop and second company arrived. Allowing the group to identify the bodies and load up the civilians. Once everything was secured and safe. The combined forces fell into a box formation and headed to the crashed cruiser.

****XXxxXX****

****SSV **_**NORMANDY**__**SR-2**_**

It was nice to see her ship again, and flying Alliance colours at that. Shepard's mission was plain and simple, request the aid from the Council to take back Earth.

"Commander," saluted a communications officer, "we're receiving a message being broadcasted on open channels."

"Patch it through," ordered Jane.

"Yes ma'am."

The message came through in clear definition, "Mayday, mayday, this is Captain Eli Redmond of the UNSC _Watchful Eye_, requesting immediate assist from all armed forces."

Shepard instantly turned to face the Spartan, who seemed to be very elated.

"I'm going to meet up with them."

"I'll come too."

Having not even left the cargo bay, Jane was back in the Osprey, wearing her military fatigues.

The Chief switched the Engines online and gunned the dropship towards the designated coordinates.

"Keep the Oculi off me," said John as he threw the craft into a barrel roll.

Shepard quickly interfaced with the weapon systems and brought them to bear on the attackers. Blue beams stabbed through the blue sky and shredded the Oculi immediately, showering the ground below with debris.

The Osprey skimmed above the water line, kicking up the clear liquid.

"Unknown Osprey, please identify, over."

That voice, it was so familiar, it was definitely a welcoming sound.

"Fhajad is that you?"

"John?" said a surprised Fhajad, "you're alive? It's good to see. Approach these coordinates from the south, we'll meet you there."

"Copy."

John guided the Osprey between the buildings, and spotted the crashed cruiser. Two hundred metres west of the site, there was a destroyed Reaper, approximately 160 metres in height/length. The large gaping hole was still smouldering, the hull still glowed red hot.

Shepard felt a sense of relief when she saw the dead Reaper. It meant that there was a military power capable of taking them on.

"Fhajad, I'm coming in."

"Copy, John, we see you."

The Dropship touched down at a makeshift landing zone. As the hatch opened, there was a massive crowd of UNSC personnel awaiting the Master Chief.

Many of them cheered as they saw the man who pulled humanity back from the brink. Fhajad was the first to come over and hug his old friend. Yes, hug, not a Spartan smile, but hug. Then of course came the Oly Oly Oxen Free whistle and the Spartan smile.

"Mind telling us what's going on John?" asked Essingdon Keyes as he shook the hand of the man who save his mother countless times.

"Nice to see you, Keyes. Well, I went to sleep, when I woke up, I saw this. I then joined Shepard here, on her mission to save human lives. I have more information here."

All the UNSC personnel knew what that meant.

"I'll upload the information to your armour," John said.

Since the wireless link was extremely fast, Donnie received all the information in less than a minute.

"Thanks, I'll have the ONI lads help me analyse this."

Upon hearing their names, Fifth Element responded with a curt nod. Shepard found them to be not that scary, even though they were trained for espionage and what not. They seemed to hold themselves in a calm and compassionate manner. Something she found odd, and somewhat unnerving. On the other hand Jane shifted her attention back to her Spartan friend. She could tell that John was very happy. His people made it out safely, and from the looks of it, recovered successfully.

"Shepard!" Anderson called out; he was wearing combat fatigues now, and was flanked by two N7 Marines.

"Anderson? What are you doing here?"

"When we got the distress call, I rallied as many men as I could, and brought them here. We're reorganising the area into a stronghold. That downed ship their might not look as much, but it knocked out a Reaper in one hit. Granted it was not as big as the Capital ships, but it's still a Reaper."

"Yeah, I saw the gutted squid on the way in," said Jane.

When the UNSC group had finished their little reunion party, they turned to face Anderson and Shepard.

"So what's the game plan?" asked Arca.

"We'll all need the help we can get," said Anderson.

"How about this," Fhajad suggested, "John and Keyes will go with Shepard. Fifth Element can hang back here, help out with logistics and analyse the information we've just gotten."

"Sounds good," agreed Keyes, "I'll see if we can contact the UNSC, long range communications on the Eye has been damaged beyond repair."

"She crashed into two Reapers, she's not going to move on her own power anytime soon," said Lotus.

"Okay," agreed Shepard, "that sounds ideal."

"Good, then let's get to it," said Anderson, "you've got a galaxy to rally Shepard."

With that, everyone returned to their posts.

"Before we go Chief, you need to prep up," said Keyes.

"Prep up?"

"The Osprey hasn't changed at all, but most of our guns have," the scientists gestured towards an Armoury Chief to bring over a large crate of weapons.

Keyes popped open the seal, revealing the latest in the UNSC arsenal. John picked up the Sabre rifle and let the weapon form itself automatically in his hands. It reminded him of the light-rifle he encountered on Requiem.

Shepard gave a low whistle as she examined the weapons.

"Here's one for you Shepard," said Donnie as he handed the Spectre a light variant of the Sabre. It was smaller, but had a faster rate of fire.

"Thank you," said Jane, in awe of the weapon in her hand.

"That's everything," said Keyes, "you can take a look at the Stealth arsenal later. Oh and I brought refills for the pipes."

With that, the three quickly headed back into the Osprey and took off towards the awaiting _Normandy_.

"So, why did you send Keyes with them?" asked Lotus, "I think you've imbalanced the love boat."

"Well if he dies, then his sister and mother will gut me," said Fhadjad, "completely."

****XXxxXX****

"_The Titan MkIV Walker is the first Walker to be put in mass production for the sole purpose of all terrain warfare. Measuring at ten metres tall, this two-legged armoured walker is armed with missile pods, dual-autocannons, plasma throwers and M888 HM Turrets. It's designed to fight in terrains deemed impassable by conventional ground vehicles, and clear out fortified positions."_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: That took a long time to writeâ€¦ hope you liked it. Please review, I live off that stuff.****

16. Ares and Mars

****A/N: Minor elements have been updated and tended to.****

****To anonymous reviewer named Jack who said "***Inconsistency with the halsey stroyline in chapter 2 she is supposedly killed but in chapter 14 she is alive and well please rectify this. other than that it is a good story, keep up the good work"**

****Um, you've either skipped a lot of chapters, or you were glossing over a lot of them. Because I've addressed this issue in Chapter 4. Anyway, thanks. =D****

****XXxxXX****

"_The Reach-class Heavy Cruiser is based off the UNSC _Infinity_. Over five-point-six kilometres long, it's main gun produces 5325 megatons of force upon impact, making it a fast ship-killer."_

Admiral Charlie "Bucktin" Wong

****XXxxXX****

****MARS, FORERUNNER OBSERVATION BUNKER****

Monitor 256 Eclipsing Knowledge

Objective 1: Remain in hibernation until fully evolved life detected
â€" (Positronic â€" Organic Synthesised) Reclaimer.

Refer to as Reclaimers for convenience.

Two Reclaimers have been detected.

Objective 2: Activate and contact Reclaimers.

Objective 3: Update archives â€" Contingency protocols enacted immediately in the event that the Reclaimers fall.

OB-256: Initiate activation protocols, deactivate stealth modules.
Commence contact

Pendingâ€|

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, UNSC **_**WATCHFUL EYE **_**CRASH SITE****

"Keep hitting them with the triple eights!" Fhajad barked.

Warthog gunner's swung their weapons around and blanketed the entire street with savage energy. A constant stream of AA fire lit up the evening sky, the _Watchful Eye_'s Point-defence guns raked up hundreds of enemy droppods. The Reaper ground forces had devoted the main drive of their ground assault on the eastern side. This meant that they would be advancing along an open avenue through heavily damaged skyscrapers and apartment blocks.

Lotus sprinted through the chaos and onto a barricade, where he pulled a wounded Alliance soldier to safety. The Operative rested the LMG's bipod atop a cinderblock and began to lay down accurate fire. Dozens of mindless Husks rushed into the firestorm, only to be reduced to slag and smouldering flesh.

"Not as bad as the Flood," commented a UNSC soldier from the mechanised.

"Damn right," concurred Lieutenant Alison Devonshire.

"Flood?" asked a young Alliance marine.

"You don't want to know kid," the Lieutenant said to the young man.

The Reaper forces soon managed to move their ranged units in, levelling the playing field. Lotus swore inwardly as enemy rounds splashed onto his shields, draining them to half. The Operative tapped into his COM to get more help.

"Arca, Greystone, I need sniper fire to knock out those Cannibals!"

"Copy."

A split second later, a thunderous roar pierced through the air as the Cannibals was reduced to a pulpy mass.

"Cooling," yelled the two Operatives.

The Epirus cycled through and vented the heat before the status light glowed green. The two snipers slapped in another fresh clip and continued to select their targets calmly.

Arca switched to Thermobaric AP rounds, perfect for negating the effects of cover and armour. The group of cannibals hiding behind a cinder block didn't stand a chance. The round passed through the concrete and detonated, shredding the Reaper forces apart with sheer force and shrapnel.

"Assholes, down," smirked Arca.

Greystone replaced his empty mag and peered down his sights. "We've got trouble."

There were at least twelve of them, coming in low and fast. Their wings were riddled with tech and blue lights. Their howl was something well beyond the natural world, it sounded as if their vocal cords were being torn apart only to heal a moment later.

"I see them, switch to TAP rounds," said Arca coolly as he trained his weapon onto a flying menace. He pulled the trigger in quick succession and watched the lead Harvester wobble and fall out of the sky. It crashed into the streets below, creating a narrow bottleneck for the attackers. The TAP munitions had literally shredded and cooked the Reaper unit's innards, filling the air with a foul stench.

Greystone shot down another, and was rewarded with the same result. The "bird" screeched in pain as one of its wings were blown off, causing it to spiral out of control and slam into a building. Shatter glass peppered the streets below like rain, and lacerated some of the Reaper forces.

A small handful of harvesters managed to break through the firestorm and unleash a volley of attack on the Allied positions. Dozens of men and women screamed in pain as the intense heat washed over them. Allison dragged a critically injured Helljumper who had taken scores of direct hits to keep those by his side safe.

"Fhajad, we've got a problem here, enemy air are moving in fast." Arca said into the COM.

"Copy," answered the Spartan. He gestured to a couple of UNSC

servicemen to set up their launchers. Plumes of smoke erupted from the tubes, following the wake of the missiles that had found a lock on the Harvesters. The deformed winged creatures exploded in a brilliant blue explosion and showered the trees with cooked flesh and slag.

"Target down," yelled the soldiers.

Arca spotted Orca Squadron soar overhead, engaged in a vicious dogfight against the Oculi. The UNSC pilots had shot down scores of enemy air units, but their birds were heavily damaged.

"We can't hold out forever," Lotus's voice crackled over the COM.

"I'm recalling all available Alliance units to fall back to this area," said Anderson.

Tank rounds echoed and smashed across the park and streets. Trees ignited in flame as the searing heat washed over them, buildings collapsed as the supports were taken out from underneath them. Fhajad had ordered trenches to be dug earlier, allowing the tanks to move into a defensive hull-down stance. The Atlas MBT was capable of firing the revered APAM round, developed in the 21st Century by the Israeli Army. It was extremely effective against fortified positions, infantry and low altitude aircraft.

Hundreds of those shells must've been fired, littering the killing ground with countless tungsten pellets. Thousands of Husks and Cannibals were literally torn to shreds because of the APAMs.

"This is Steel Troop, we're out of APAM rounds," said Captain Sam Webb.

"Copy that Webb," answered Fhajad, "supply vehicles are on the way."

During the brief period of reloading, the MBTs had to pull back to safety, while the Badger MAVs took up temporary firing positions. These eight wheeled, medium armoured vehicles, armed with dual autocannons are most effective in urban and forest-like environments.

Bolts of blue savage energy spewed out of the guns in a deafening roar. Trees were scythed down; overturned vehicles were turned to slag. The Reaper forces were cooked were they stood.

"We've got Oculi inbound!" warned an Alliance soldier.

Dozens of the orb shaped drones swarmed in. Angry red tongues licked at the defenders. Men and women screamed as their armour bubble and their skins blistered. One of the warthogs was caught in the attack. Fhajad managed to see its outline right before it exploded, showering the immediate area in shrapnel.

The Point-defence guns on the _Watchful Eye_ spun around to fill the sky with anti-air fire. Scores of Oculi exploded or spiralled out of control.

"Their searching for snipers!" yelled Arca over the COM as he spotted

a UNSC crow's nest explode.

"We gotta move!" beckoned Greystone.

The two Operatives slid down the hull of the downed vessel, seconds before their former position was engulfed in flame.

"There's too many of them!" Lotus gasped.

Fhajad flicked the COM channel, "Orca, do you copy?"

"Copy sir," said Squadron Leader Orwell Granger.

"Can you provide assistance?"

"Yes sir."

"I need fire support on the northern avenue and the southern killzone."

"Copy sir, we're rolling in."

The Claymore Interceptors threw themselves into a steep dive; fighters broke off to engage their vectors. The lead plane swooped in low and unleashed its short-range plasma missiles, instantly devastating a flight of Harvesters. The second Claymore thundered in with its main gun, throwing up dirt and tearing the Reaper forces apart. With the Oculi out of the picture, the UNSC had air superiority.

"Sierra Oh-eight-four," Orwell's voice crackled over the COM. "I've got eyes on friendly armoured column inbound."

"Copy, break off and cover them."

"Yes sir."

Fhajad quickly sprinted back into the hangar bay and motioned towards the Osprey crews.

"Air space is clear enough for you guys to operate, get moving."

The pilots quickly saluted him before scrambling. The dropships hovered close to the ground, sending billowing gusts of air onto the blacked earth, and blanketed the killzone with suppressive fire.

â€|

Eventually, the Reaper forces retreated. They knew that the costs of taking the ship were beginning to outweigh the benefits. They were going to come back in full force, but not yet.

"Casualties?" asked Anderson. He watched the line of men and women being carried into the hangar on stretchers.

"Five mechanised KIA," answered Captain Eli Redmond, "twenty-four wounded, on our end. Yours?"

"Twenty-three KIA, fourteen wounded. Could've been worse if you

weren't coordinating the artillery."

"Thanks, but we're not going to last very long unless reinforcements arrive."

"How long before the UNSC show up?"

"Less than a month. We would've called High Command, but the crash took out our long range COMs."

"Looks like we can defeat the Reapers, conventionally," Anderson said with certainty as he looked across the carnage.

"Yes, but it's going to be a long war, many are going to die."

****XXxxxXX****

****THE ARK, UNSC HIGHCOM****

The AI "walked" over towards the Fleet Admiral. Her body was made out of hardlight, giving her a very lifelike appearance. At the core of the hardlight body, was a complex monitor drone with a positronic brain. The only miniaturised system that could support a Contender-class AI. Over the years her avatar had adopted a more modest look, she wore scientist apparel complete with a lab coat but gloveless hands.

"Admiral, recon has reported in," said Cortana.

Hood turned to the young officer addressing him, "what have they got?"

"UNSC _Dalton_ reports that New Wessex is empty, but the environment is stable. All Outer Colonies remain unstable."

"Thank you, Cortana."

****XXxxxXX****

****THE ARK, MUSEUM SQUARE, MUSEUM OF HUMANITY****

It was common for an AI avatar to be seen in public. Since the people of the Coalition were practically organic and machine hybrids. The line between "artificial" and "natural" had faded greatly. Cortana gracefully walked up the stairs in the main foyer, past the John-117 Monument and towards the memorial gardens. It had been her custom to come here every year.

As she stepped back into the warm sunlight, she "smelt" the scent of sweet lavender, and took in the sight of the beautiful landscape. Trees with gold and red leaves lined the stone foot path and streams; they welcomed the AI with a soft glow.

Cortana began her climb up a small hill, where Doctor Catherine Halsey and Commander Miranda Keyes awaited her. With her luminous blue friends, the AI gently lay down a bouquet flowers atop the empty grave.

"_John-117_"

"I miss him," Cortana said softly.

"We all do," said Halsey as she squeezed the AI's hand.

Cortana missed her old friend, who was like brother to her; a brother who travelled to the ends of the world and stayed there for her.

****XXxxXX****

****SSV *_**NORMANDY**__**SR-2**_**, LEAVING EARTH****

Earth's atmosphere was set alight by thousands of burning ships streaking towards the planet. So many people didn't get out in time. Jane remembered that young boy in the vent, he was so scared, overwhelmed with shock. "_Everyone is dying,_" she remembered him say, right before he disappeared.

The remaining Home Defence Fleet had escaped through the Sol relay to rally the remaining Alliance Fleets.

"Was it like this the first time?" asked Jane solemnly, as she stared out of the observation deck's window.

"Yes, it'll get worse before it gets better," said John as he placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, "get some rest, you'll need it."

"No, I'll be fine."

The Spartan removed his hand and placed it by his side again. He too didn't feel comfortable about leaving Earthâ€¦ again. However, he accepted the necessity to leave, instead of remaining rooted. The Alliance fleet barely stood a chance against the Reapers, in just minutes of the attack, Earth had fallen. Even the UNSC lasted longer against the Covenant. But the Alliance, the Galaxy, their fleets could easily be overpowered by the 26th Century UNSC Naval forces. What chance do they have?

"What the hell is going on? Where's Anderson? Where are we going?" Vega asked as he entered the shuttle bay.

"We're leaving," Shepard said sternly.

"Leaving?" Vega asked incredulously.

"What's going on?" this time it was Ashley.

John and Keyes retreated back to give the team some space. If they were un-eased by the presence of two heavily armoured Supersoldiers, they didn't show it.

"Anderson ordered us to the Citadel, get help for the fight."

"Bullshit! He wouldn't order us to leave," Vega interrupted.

"We don't have a choice," said Shepard, "without help, this war is already over."

"Forget it; drop me off some placeâ€|"

"Enough!" Jane said, pulling the Lieutenant back in line, "don't you think I'd rather stay and fight? We're going back to the Citadel, you want out? You can catch a ride back from there."

"Commander?" Joker's voice erupted over the COM.

"Joker? Is that you?" asked Jane, relieved.

"Alive and kicking," the pilot smirked.

"Got an emergency transmission from Admiral Hackett for you."

"Patch it through."

The video feed was choppy, constantly interrupted by periods of static, but at least the main point of the message got through.

"Shepardâ€| sustained heavy lossesâ€| force was overwhelmingâ€| no way we can defeat them conventionallyâ€| Anderson reportsâ€| UNSC are holdingâ€| Repair forces backâ€| outnumberedâ€| need reinforcements."

"Anderson's already ordered me to the Citadel to talk to the Council."

"First I need you toâ€| Alliance outpost on Marsâ€| or we lose control of the system."

"Yes sir."

"â€| been researchingâ€| Prothean archives with Doctor T'Soniâ€| may have found a way to stop the Reaperâ€| contact soon, Hackett out."

The link was terminated, allowing Shepard to flick back to the ship's COMs.

"Joker, set a course for the Mars archives."

"Mars? Roger that?"

"This is loco," breathed Vega

"Why mars, what does he think we'll find there?" asked Ashley.

"I don't know," Shepard responded, "grab your gear."

â€|

Keyes was working on a couple of elongated objects on a workbench close to the Osprey. The objects were like three 50cm long dark grey hexagonal tubes attached together in a triangular fashion.

"What are those?" John asked.

"These, are Achilles Missile Packs, called AMPs. Fires fifty-cal

sized missiles with a C12F plastic explosive and EMP warhead. It's designed to take down anything nasty that gets to close for comfort. There is a one-second fuse after impact or sudden deceleration, helps negate shields." Essingdon answered

"Are they reusable?"

"Yes, but they're a pain to reload in the field. These things should be used as a last resort; you only carry six of them per pack."

"How many packs do I get?"

"Two, one on each side of your back, they'll be well out of the way of the thrusters."

"Twelve rounds in total?"

Donnie nodded. Keyes had already attached two to his own MJOLNIR suit, and now it was John's turn.

"Sit down. I'll reconfigure your systems."

John eased himself onto the Osprey's ramp as Shepard came by in her silver livery N7 armour.

"Can I talk to you guys for a minute?"

The two men nodded the air seals popped as they eased off their helmets. It was always much easier for Jane to talk to a face, rather than a visor.

"What do you need?" asked John.

"Do you think we can beat the Reapers?"

"Not by yourself," answered John, "A Reaper's main gun has the destructive power between one-hundred-and-thirty-two, to four-hundred-and-fifty four kilotons of TNT. Your dreadnoughts have thirty-eight kilotons of destructive capabilities."

"Yes, four dreadnoughts can take on one Reaper," said Shepard, "but we don't have that many."

"In the twenty-sixth century, our ships had a minimum destructive capability of sixty-four kilotons," added Keyes, "three Paris class frigates should be able to take out a Reaper. It's really a matter of who shoots first. Same thing goes for Covenant vessels, they should be able to survive a direct hit from a Reaper, but will be heavily damaged."

"So this is your combat effectiveness a thousand years ago?"

Keyes nodded, "we should have little difficulty engaging the Reapers conventionally, only problem is, we lack manpower. The Coalition will enter this war, but it will be a long and costly war. Billions will die before we win."

That small statement provided Jane a flicker of hope, but it will come at such a cost. There are millions if not billions of colonies in the galaxy; most will already have Reapers bearing down on them.

This means that the Coalition would be up against millions of Reapers.

"We'll be fine, Shepard," John reassured.

****XXxxXX****

****CERBERUS HQ, THE ILLUSIVE MAN'S OFFICE****

"Harper," said a woman coldly over the coms.

"Gaia," acknowledged the Illusive Man.

"Care to explain what happened? I invested billions of resources into this organisation; I expected to see some progress."

"And you got your progress," replied Jack Harper as he took a swill from his drink, "Humanity is safe, for now."

"I expected to see an army, not a woman," Gaia snapped.

"Resurrecting Shepard was a good move," said Harper, "the galaxy needs a person who is larger than life to rally them. Because when the Reapers arrive, we can't rely on politics."

"Shepard is her own person; you've already lost potential resources when she destroyed that Collector base."

Harper gazed down at the black marble floor before returning his eyes back to the console. "Yes, and you know that I do not like that as much as you do, but I will find another way for humanity to survive."

"Do what you must Harper. I expect to see more desirable results. There better be an army when my next delivery of resources arrives."

"Yes Gaia."

Harper never liked conversing with the woman codenamed Gaia. But Cerberus would've never reached this level of strength if it wasn't for her. He found it odd that she sent her support through raw resources rather than funds. It just seemed so much more costly to transport megatons of refined metals than wire a few funds.

****XXxxXX****

****UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, IN ORBIT OF INSTALLATION 00****

Miranda Keyes stood in the vehicle bay and inspected an Atlas Tank. Its main gun had an incredible firing rate of thirty rounds per minute, and was capable of switching between Ion/Hard Light and specialised munitions. The four thick treads on the vehicle made it look slower than it actually was. Being able to move at over 80km/hour, a company of the Atlas MBT would be a nightmare to stop.

"Your brother helped design that," said Halsey, walking over as her

heels clicked on the deck.

"What didn't he do?" Keyes said, admiring her younger sibling.

"Essingdon devoted a lot of time to overhauling and improving combat tactics, doctrine and technology, in any way possible."

"I guessed as much. But isn't he wearing himself out?"

"Yes," answered Catherine, "I'd assumed he was socially awkward if I hadn't seen him talk to the female staff."

"So he's never had a girlfriend?"

"No."

Miranda paused for a bit before asking awkwardly, "Is he gay?"

Halsey burst into a fit of laughter which she barely managed to keep under control, "more like uninterested in pursuing a relationship."

"Mom, he's over a thousand years old, and you're telling me, he doesn't want to start a family?"

"Pretty much," Halsey sighed, taking a sip from her coffee, "like I said, he spent a lot of time researching and writing reports; proposing new ideas on how the UNSC should operate."

"He's worse than you are."

Catherine smiled, "in more ways than one."

****XXxxxXX****

****SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, IN ORBIT OF MARS****

"Hey, I'm getting a reading here, Chief," Keyes said as the Osprey's console began to ping. "Encrypted message appears to be coming from the trench."

"Patch it through," said John.

"Okay, here we go," said Don as his fingers danced across the keyboard.

There was static for a brief moment, before the message became crystal clear.

"Salutations Reclaimer! I am Two-five-six Eclipsing Knowledge, monitor of evolutionary progress of humanity, the chosen successors of my Makers."

The two men pondered the message for a moment.

"You think we should look into it?" asked Keyes.

"Yes, Shepard will be fine," answered John.

"Are you sure?"

The Spartan-II gave a curt nod.

"Alright then. I'll start up the Osprey."

As John strapped himself into the co-pilot seat, he flicked on his COM to contact Shepard.

"John?"

"Shepard, we've received a message groundside. We're going to investigate."

There was a slight pause on the other end before Jane responded.
"Okay, be careful John."

"You too."

The Osprey's engine began to hum as the bay doors opened. The _Normandy_'s vacuum barriers kicked in, preventing depressurisation. Keyes gently pushed the throttle and sent the dropship into the abyss of space.

As the Spartan shifted his gaze to Mars, he could see that the planet still bore the scars from the Human-Covenant and Coalition-Covenant War. The planet would've remained habitable if it weren't for the horrendous amount of bombardment it endured.

Through the rear-view cameras, John watched Shepard's shuttle leave the bay and bank right to its destination.

"Be quick John," said Shepard.

"I will."

"I'll hold you to it."

****XXxxxXX****

****MARS, ALLIANCE OUTPOST, PROTHEAN ARCHIVES****

The shuttle shuddered as the winds bashed against it.

"I've been trying to reach Mars on a secure channel," said Joker over the COM, "no one's answering."

"Any sign of Reaper activity?" Shepard asked.

"Negative."

"EDI?"

"The base appears to be online," said the AI, "it's possible that the occupants have been evacuated."

"We'll know soon enough," Jane said, walking back into the main cabin, "be ready, Joker. Just incase."

"Roger that, _Normandy _out."

"We're almost there," said Vega.

The shuttle closed in onto the base, and touched down on the outskirts.

"Still got no contact from the base, but we've got a massive storm coming our way."

"How long till it hits?" Jane asked as she eased her helmet on.

"Half hour tops," Vega replied, "but after that, we're going to have difficulty keeping COMs with the _Normandy_."

"Understood," said the Commander.

Shepard and her team quickly dismounted the vehicle and began their approach to the Archives on foot.

"Damn, that's a huge storm," breathed Vega, "looks a lot bigger in person."

"C'mon Lieutenant, it doesn't look that bad," said Williams.

"Doesn't mean it can't kill us," James deadpanned.

"I'm more worried about the war back on Earth, or the fact that nobody here is checking in," said Ashley as she swept the area with her M8.

"Fair enough," Vega concurred.

Jumping off a ridgeline, Jane saw a couple of Alliance soldiers, bloodied and slumped, by a couple of crates.

"What is that?"

"Alliance, Sergeant Reeves," said Williams, "doesn't look like he put up a fight."

"Something's not right, keep a low profile until we know what's going on," said Shepard.

"Roger that," Vega complied.

Moving along the ridgeline, the team began to quicken their pace as they heard gunshots.

There were a couple of armoured vehicles, in a white and yellow livery, around them was personnel clad in armour of a similar theme. As the team moved closer, they saw Alliance Marines being held captive. Or so it would seem until the lead aggressor aimed a pistol at the Marines' forehead.

"Holy shit! They're executing them," cried James as the shots rang out.

"Weapons free," Jane hissed.

The strike team moved behind cover and began to engage the hostiles directly. Jane let loose barrages of biotic attacks, slamming scores of men against the trucks or each other, before finishing the rest with her Predator pistol.

Shepard sprinted over to the tanks and scanned for anymore hostiles â€" none. They were all dead. Holstering her weapon, the Commander managed to see the emblem on each tank.

"Doesn't look like they came here in force," said Vega.

"Yeah, just a few vehicles," Shepard agreed.

"Kinda suggests they had helpâ€¦ from the inside," said Ashley.

"Seems likely."

"You need a lot more men and firepower to take this place otherwise."

Jane quickly lead her team into the airlock, she moved towards a control console and closed the doors.

"I need a straight answer, Shepard," said Ashley.

"About what?"

"Do you know anything about this? What is Cerberus doing here?"

That question crawled under Jane's skin. She hated what Ash was insinuating, she hated the level of hostility her old friend was aiming at her. It made the Commander clench her left fist behind her back, and clench her jaw.

"What makes you think I know what they're up to?" Shepard asked, her voice seemed to suck out every ounce of warmth out of the air.

"You worked for them," said Ash, resting her hands on the railing, "how am I supposed to believe you cut all ties?"

"We joined forces to take down the Collectors. That's it!" Jane emphasised.

"They rebuilt you from scratch; they gave you a ship, resources."

"Let me be clear, I've had no contact with Cerberus since I destroyed the Collector base. And I have no idea why they're here now, or what they want."

"Commander Shepard's been under constant surveillance since coming back to Earth," Vega said, coming to the defence of his CO. "No way they've communicated since."

"Sorry Shepard," Ashley apologised.

The vents began to hiss as breathable air was pumped into the room, allowing the group to take off their stifling helmets.

"I shouldn't have to explain myself to you Ash," said Jane.

A small shudder rocked through the platform as it began to elevate, lifting the team into a depot.

"Please, trust me," said Shepard, attempting to defuse Ash's suspicions.

"I do, it's just thatâ€¦"

Another gunshot rang out, causing the team to instinctively take cover. Jane gestured her group to remain in cover.

It sounded as if there was a struggle going on in the vents. Until, one of the output terminals was dislodged from its position and crashed onto the ground. An Asari leapt out of the opening, and turned around to face her two pursuers. She summoned a singularity, pulling the two Cerberus troops off the ground, allowing her to execute them swiftly.

Realising that the Asari was Liara, Shepard holstered her weapon and approached her friend. James however, still had his guard up and kept his M8 trained on the Doctor.

"Easy there Lieutenant," Jane said as she motioned for James to lower his weapon. "She's with us."

"Shepard," Liara turned around, "thank the goddess you're alive."

"You too Liara."

"I was so worried when the reports came in. I'm sorry, about Earth."

"Yeah," said Ashley, "it was difficult to leave."

"Ashley, I'm sorry," Liara paused for a moment, "where's John?"

"He and a colleague said they had to investigate something near the trench," Shepard answered.

"There's another one?"

"Yes," Jane confirmed.

"So there is more hope after all," Liara smiled softly.

"They can defeat the Reapers, it's justâ€¦"

"â€¦just that it will take too long."

"Yeah," the Commander nodded.

"Well, I have something, maybe. I've discovered plans for a Prothean device, one that could wipe out the Reapers."

"Here on Mars?"

"In the Prothean Archives, yes."

****XXxxXX****

****MARS, FORERUNNER OBSERVATION BUNKER****

"Entering the storm," said Keyes, "this is going to be bumpy."

"Copy, rerouting power to auxiliary stabilizers," said John.

The Osprey wobbled under the howling winds, and the shields flared as lightning struck it. Through skill and sheer luck, the two Spartans managed to arrive at the destinations safely. The bunker was smaller than the two had anticipated. It was located underneath an overhang, hidden away from prying eyes.

Shouldering their Sabre rifles, the Supersoldiers advanced cautiously to the entrance. John placed his hand gently on a strobing red console, it then pulsed green and the doors parted open.

The interior held true to the generic Forerunner design, the walls were off a deep silver colour, illuminated by dull blue lights.

"Greetings Reclaimer!" said a Monitor cheerfully, it's voice was unnervingly similar to its brethren known as 343 Guilty Spark. "I am Two-five-six Eclipsing Knowledge."

With Spark's treachery still fresh in John's mind, he aimed his weapon at the monitor. Keyes on the other hand, having met many other Forerunner Monitors gave this one, the benefit of the doubt.

"Easy there, John," Essingdon said, "what is your directive here, Two-five-six?"

"My directives were at first to monitor mining operations on Mars after the activation of the array. Then remain in hibernation until a synthesised life is detected, also known as a Reclaimer. From there I will assist you in any way I can, will enacting sentient safeguard protocols in the event of cataclysmic destruction."

"I thought all humans were referred to as Reclaimers."

"That is correct," 256 answered, "however, that terminology was updated after the activation of the Forerunner Archives. Humans will be referred to as humans, whereas synthesised humans will be referred to as, Reclaimers."

In a way, Keyes and John saw logic behind that. The people of the UNSC/UEG were no longer humans, but something more. The Genetic modification, Positronic implants and the Nanite injections made them something else entirely.

"Hmm, I have detected multiple unknown entities in orbit of Mars. Their actions appear to be hostile. We must depart at once Reclaimer."

"The Reapers are here," John concluded.

"Let's get out of here," Keyes gestured, "we can contact the _Normandy_ once we've left the storm."

This time, it was John's turn to fly; he strapped himself into the pilot seat, and flicked on the engines.

"Shouldn't we destroy this base?" Keyes asked as he activated the Osprey's weapon systems.

"The choice is up to you Reclaimer, do you wish for me to initiate a self-destruct sequence of the observation post?"

"Do it," said John as he pulled the Osprey into a climb and out of the trench.

"Done," 256 complied.

A split second later, incendiary charges were detonated, melting the small post, and turning it into rubble.

The Osprey began to shudder again as it flew within the storm clouds. The dropship began to even out once it entered clear skies. Turning on the COM channel, John attempted to contact the ground team.

"Shepard, this is John, do you copy?" asked the Spartan.

"Yes," Jane panted, it sounded like if she was running.

"Do you acquire assistance?"

"Yes!" Shepard yelled, "get here as fast as you fucking can, Dr CorÃ© has the data!"

There was no time to inquire what the data was about, but if it got Shepard to swear at the top of her lungs, it was damn important.

"Copy, we'll be there soon."

****XXxxXX****

****MARS, ALLIANCE OUTPOST/PROTHEAN ARCHIVES****

Jane's body screamed in agony as she pursued Dr Eva CorÃ© across the base. Shepard would probably have to be one of the fittest women in existence; after all, she was N7. However, she was slightly insulted that a Cerberus scientist matched her speed easily.

"Look out!" Jane yelled as she dodged an incineration attack.

Shepard managed to recover, but it was too late, Eva had made it onto a Cerberus shuttle with the data. She felt something inside her lock shut, and did the only thing possible, call for help.

"She's getting away with the data! Does anyone copy? James? Chief? _Normandy_? Anybody? Please respond!"

"I got this one!" James's voice crackled over the COM.

A small sense of relief washed over Jane as she saw the Alliance shuttle appear, but all that was quickly dashed when she realised what Vega was about to do.

"Move!" she barked.

The Cerberus shuttle, having not been reinforced, crumpled under the impact and smashed onto the roof in flames.

Vega's shuttle on the other hand, had been moderately damaged, allowing him to land. Albeit in a messy fashion.

"_Normandy_'s on its way," said Vega as he exited the shuttle.

As the team prepared to leave, the door of the burning Cerberus burst forth, and revealed an alarming sight. Dr Eva CorÃ©, emerged from the wreckage, her synthetic flesh and clothing having burned off, revealed a charred robotic body.

In that short time frame, Eva quickly rushed Ashley, and slammed her repeatedly against the hull of the shuttle, before letting the Marine slump to the ground. The robotic creature then shifted its attention onto Shepard, who had already opened fire with her pistol.

Eva stumbled and collapsed under the barrage, a few metres short of Jane.

"Ash!?" she called out worried, "Ash? Can you hear me?"

"We gotta go Shepard, the Chief's already on board" said Joker over the COM as the _Normandy_ appeared, "Reapers have shown up in the system."

"Copy, Joker. Vega, grab that thing, it has the data we need," Jane grunted as she hefted Ashley's limp body onto the _Normandy_'s ramp.

John, Keyes and a squad of Marines were already covering the ground team as the pulled back safely into the ship. In the far distance, the Reapers had already begun their descent on the settlements.

â€|

Jane managed to haul her friend's body into the med bay, where she lay Ashley down gently onto the bed. James on the other hand, dumped Eva's body unceremoniously on the opposite med.

Shepard rested her hands on the end of the bed, unable to remove her eyes away from her wounded friend.

"Ashley needs medical attention," said Liara, attempting to make eye contact.

The Commander was no larger-than-life person. She was still human, and was still prone to the emotional burden of a grievously injured friend.

"The Citadel is our best shot," Liara said again.

"Okay. Joker, plot a course for the Citadel."

"Copy, Commander. Admiral Hackett would also like to see you in the COMs room."

"Patch it through," Jane said as she left the med bay.

â€|

"Shepard, what have you got for me?" Hackett asked.

"Liara has discovered a Prothean device that can help win this war quickly. She'll forward to you shortly."

"Good, I'll have the remaining fleets to gather resources to build it."

"Ashley was also injured while protecting me. We're going to the Citadel to get her treatment."

"That's sad to hear, but when you're at the Citadel, do what you can to get the Council to aid us."

"I will sir."

"Good to hear, also, I have received more reports about the UNSC. Do what you can to notify them what's going on."

"Yes sir," Jane saluted.

"Hackett out," the Admiral said, and returned the favour.

****XXxxXX****

"_The Hampton-class Destroyer is one kilometre long, and is designed for the sole purpose of gutting enemy ships. Having no contingent of wings, the Hampton-class is made to out move its opponent to deliver the firepower where its wanted."_

Vice Admiral Tyson Lai

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** I've seen the new ME3 extended endingsâ€| they're somewhat satisfying but not much. So, when we reach that point, I'm just going to write the whole thing from the ground up.**

****In any case, please review (I live off it). The admins have made it easier, the comment box is right below.****

17. Revelations for the Citadel

****A/N:** To anonymous reviewer named "Guest"â€| loooool. Hahaha, you made my day. XD**

****To Crudder Cookie, thanks!****

****XXxxXX****

"_Flame throwers are the pinnacle weapon in psychological warfare, and dense environments. But they do have a drawback, and that's their range and ability to destroy armoured targets. So, the boys at RnD, have developed the M1 Plasma Projector. The weapon's range is fifty metres, allowing operators to be at a relatively safe distance when clearing out enemy fortifications. Its modular handheld shape allows greater accuracy and mobility, and should the weapon be breached during combat. Friendlies will not be at risk of an explosion due to the docile munitions used."_

Doctor Amanda Thorkais

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, UNSC **_**WATCHFUL EYE**_** CRASH SITE****

Redarch and Briar instantly took up firing positions around the door, covering me while I placed the explosives.

"_Stack up right," I ordered._

They complied and moved up behind me, while reloading their weapons.

"_Blowing the charge," I said, "three, two, one, mark."_

The oak wooden door instantly shattered into thousands of pieces, showering the room with splinters. I was the first one through that door, probably breaking a lot of textbook rules doing so. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl once my adrenaline started pumping.

The first Innies I shot danced a deathly macabre as the incendiary rounds made short work of his body armour. The next one dropped like a stone, his brains splattered all over the console. By the time I shot a third Innies, Briar had already moved to the left side of the room, while Redarch moved to the right. We began our sweep, and came across our secondary target, holding a hostage.

In this scenario, Marines would try to talk to the guy or flank around and kill him. Spec Ops would try and go for a headshot. But us? We're spooks, clandestine operatives.

This Innies knew how to have a standoff using a hostage. He kept his exposure to an absolute minimal, making a headshot impossible, likewise if we wanted to disarm him. So we just squeezed the trigger, all three of us, and watched the Innies and his hostage go down. I didn't even give it a second thought, just stopped and scanned the guy's face to make sure we got the right person. My HUD pinged positive, and I smiled with satisfaction that we completed our secondary.

"_Second Element to all-teams, secondary completed, report in," I said into the COM quickly._

"_Three Bravo, here, just eliminated safe house,"_

"_Third Element, here, completed extracting information from target."_

"_Three Echo, here, we're extracting the HVI."_

The HVI was a woman, she was absolutely gorgeous, and she was ONI, which made her, a damn dangerous person. How she was compromised, we didn't know. But at least she was grateful to see us.

"_Good," I said, "all teams, head to evac, cover Three Echo."_

Green acknowledgement lights winked on, and that's when we started to move out. But next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground, mortar shells going off all around me.

"_The fuckers are using arty on us!" yelled Briar, "Three Bravo is down."_

"_All units, be advised, you have hostiles coming to bear, get the hell out of here!" the Spy Drone Operator was immediately cut off by static._

I turned my gaze skyward and watched the drone spiralling down to the ground.

My body screamed in pain as I pulled myself up and grabbed my weapon. I quickly ran over to where Three Bravo was, one dead, two critically injured. They're not going to be getting out of this one, alive or dead.

"_Go," the guy coughed, "we'll cover you."_

I nodded in agreement and tossed them an extra mag.

"_Let's go, I beckoned."_

We started our run to the LZ, deep down; I knew we were going to lose more men. We were deep behind enemy lines for a snatch and grab operation. We weren't prepared to take on a garrison of pissed off Innies head on.

I could hear gunfire in the background, followed by silence, and an explosion. Three Bravo had decided to detonate all explosives they had on themselves. Probably bought us a few more minutes.

All around us, I could see civvies running into their homes and locking their doors shut. Rounds soon started to slam all around us. I could even feel a couple of bullets hit my armour plates.

"_Fuck! I'm hit!" Redarch yelled as an AP round went straight through his gut._

I quickly grabbed an armour strap and started dragging him into cover.

"_We can't carry you!" I grimly said._

"_I know," Redarch nodded, "get the HVI out of here, or this op is

worth shit."_

Four men down, abso-fucking-lutely brilliant! Our plan, my plan, was to complete our objectives and get to the city outskirts through the sewers. However the Innies had closed in on us, forcing us to go through the city. Knowing that most of us weren't going to be leaving this place, I called in the order that everyone hated.

"_Rearguard last stand," I uttered._

There wasn't an argument like I expected. All of us in this Op are professionals, arguing would get everyone killed.

Third Element broke off from our formation and dug in, while we pressed on deeper into the slums.

"_Super six-seven, do you copy?" I tried hailing our transport._

"_Super six-seven here, we are circling the city, need you to plant a beacon, over."_

"_Copy that."_

Pretty soon, RPG and mortar shells started to rain down all around us. Briar was killed instantly, so I quickly paused and pulled a pin on one of his frags before running again. Then my HUD flashed red, indicating that all of Third Element was killed.

"_Shit!" I gritted._

I felt myself being lifted off from the ground and slammed through a window as a mortar shell got a direct hit on Three Echo. Jumping out the window, I checked their vitals. Only the HVI was still alive. It looked like Three Echo took most of the damage for her.

"_Are you okay?" I yelled as rounds crashed into my armour._

"_Yeah," she gasped._

"_What's your name?" I asked, setting down my modified MA5D._

"_Corona."_

I grabbed armour components from the dead operatives around me and got her to wear it. Then I gave her a weapon and a few extra mags.

"_Corona, make your way to the LZ, I'll stay here and hold them off for as long as I can."_

"_What?" she yelled, "you're crazy!"_

"_I just got my men killed! Go now, or we all die for nothing!"_

"_Fuck!" Corona muttered._

"_Run!" I yelled._

"_Okay," Corona said, "and thanks."_

And with that, she started running, her auburn hair trailing behind her. I moved behind a wrecked car for cover and began to open fire. The skirmishers managed to get off a few shots before I cut them down. But then the main bulk of their force soon arrived. And they were playing dirty.

Child soldiers, militia and angry civilians alike were headed straight towards me. In their hands, they paraded the broken helmets and weapons of my men.

I squeezed the trigger and gunned them down indiscriminately. An enemy doesn't need to be armed to do harm. I didn't care how old they were, or what they held, I just shot them all. Because those who didn't want to kill me, had already left the area. I don't know how many Laws or Conventions I was breaking, but I was pretty sure it was made null by the Innies' actions. They must've been fuelled up on drugs or something, because they were unfazed by being out in the open. Every bullet that left my barrel found its mark and burned into its target.

"_Die fascist pig!" I heard a teenage girl yell as I cut down the boy standing next to her._

In the heat of the moment, I didn't really think, I just let training take its course. And training dictated that I kill anything that was a threat, regardless of age, gender, or status. Innies weren't UNSC, which made my task somewhat easier. I didn't have to identify who or what I killed.

When my counter read empty, I slapped in my last clip, and held the Innies at bay. I was probably crouching in a pile of spent shells by the time they got within fifty metres of me. Finishing the last clip, I picked up a shotgun from a Three Bravo and pulled the trigger.

It must've been packed with an explosive warhead, because the first Innies were blown literally in half. Being high on adrenaline, I didn't feel any recoil as the automatic shotgun kept on firing. Eventually I burned through all of the explosive rounds, and moved onto canister shot rounds.

I didn't know how many bodies there were, littered all over the roof tops and streets, I didn't really care either. This whole ordeal was like something out of a movie, where the hero managed to have a ludicrous kill count.

"_Arca, I'm at the LZ," Corona's voice crackled over the COM, "two Operators have dismounted and are coming for you."_

"_What! You have to get out of here!" I yelled._

"_Parangosky wants you back alive."_

Shit, that woman is going to get us all killed. I hate Parangosky with a passion.

"_Copy that, patch me through to the other guys," I said calmly._

The COM crackled for a moment before sparking back to life again. "Arca, hang tight, we're coming for you," said a familiar voice.

"_Lotus?" I asked incredulously._

"_Don't worry buddy, we're coming."_

"_Be advised, all personnel in this area are hostile, engage regardless if armed or not."_

"_Copy."_

The COM switched off, and I inserted a fresh ammo drum into the shotgun and continued firing.

The Innies however, weren't demoralised by their losses and kept on coming. I felt my skin blister as a mortar shell zeroed in on me. I was still conscious when I slammed into another car's windshield and pulled out my side arm.

I couldn't move my legs. I looked down to see them covered in blood and shrapnel. I could feel my body failing as a bullet managed to get lucky, and embed itself in my gut. All my biofoam canisters had been breached, rendering them unusable. There was nothing left but adrenaline to stave off the shock.

I was slumped on a car's hood as the Innies closed in. Death was coming for me; I could feel his serene presence. Ironical for such a figure everyone fears. But I stopped fearing death a long time ago.

Emptying mag after mag, I kept the Innies away, killing scores of men, women and teenagers. All of them were brainwashed and on a narcotic high. They were so intent on killing me, they were hollering, chanting, reduced to a bloodlust primal stage.

Funny how I thought I would've died minutes ago, none of the Innies tried to flank me. A side effect from being in a blood thirsty mindset.

But then I felt someone grab my armour plates and started to pull me off the car. I screamed out in pain as a violent ripple surge through my body. I looked at my shoulders to see a UNSC gauntleted hand.

"_Easy, easy!" It was Greystone, covering Lotus._

"_Hang in there buddy, we got you," Lotus said, while he handed me my MA5D and fresh clips._

My long-time friend injected biofoam into my wounds, preventing me from being claimed by shock and blood loss.

_I could see Greystone in the corner of my eye, picking off the most threatening targets with his DMR, while Lotus wielded an SMG in one hand, and dragged me with the other. The dirt road beneath me was

being painted with my own blood. That would make it easy enough for the Innies to follow us._

I could hear the Osprey land behind us. The gun operators instantly opened fire on the mass. Like me, they didn't discriminate between targets and shot at whatever moved.

An ODSF fireteam quickly stomped down the ramp and covered us as Lotus dragged me to safety. Once Greystone ran up the ramp, the Helljumpers slowly retreated back into the hold.

My HUD showed me a readout of the FoF tags on each of the ODSFs. The leader of the small team was Second Lieutenant Alison Devonshire.

"_We're all on board," she said, "let's get out of here."_

"_Roger that," said the pilot._

â€|

Arca awoke from his dream, a dream that always haunted his sleep. He had earned a pay raise and a medal after that mission. But it seemed more like a badge of shame, than a badge of honour.

Medals were a representation of a person's actions. And Anthony was scarred by what he had done on that day. He had condemned his men to death, and torn hundreds of families apart. How many kids, mothers or fathers had he killed? How many lives had he destroyed? Hell, he didn't even know what kind of Intel, Corona was carrying.

The Operative had followed doctrine, and by all definitions, he had done the right thing. But it didn't help; it didn't make him feel better.

He heard a knock on his door, and got off his bed to answer it. As he eased open the door, Anthony found himself to be in the presence of Lieutenant Devonshire. Alison was wearing a set of UNSC fatigues, with the sleeves rolled up just above her elbows.

"Devonshire," Anthony acknowledged, rubbing his eyes, "what can I do for you?"

"Another Alliance convoy has just arrived; there are a lot of wounded civvies. Your team is already treating the less severe cases, but we need more medics down in the hangar."

"Alright, I'll need your help too," Anthony said as he pulled on his boots, shirt and rolled up the sleeves just below his elbows.

As the two made their way down the hallway, the ONI Field Agent slipped on a pair of augmented reality glasses and switched the device on.

"Did you get a good night's sleep?" Alison asked, noticing the Operative's tired yawn and posture.

"I rarely do."

Being a Helljumper, Alison had seen the vast spectrum of soldiers and

their behaviour. Anthony's mannerisms were rare, but not new to her. It was clear to her, that the man standing on the opposite side of the elevator had seen or done something that he severely regretted. And compartmentalised it within him, suppressing the emotions.

"Well stay awake, it's going to be a long night."

The hangar had been transformed into a refugee camp, combat personnel did whatever they could to maximise the effectiveness of the space. Biological contingency equipment was used to create sterile equipment within certain prefab shelters so that they could be operating theatres.

Bright quickly jogged over to Anthony and began explaining what was going on.

"Greystone has gone with some of the lads from the mechanised to grab whatever they can from the city. Med bay's filled with criticals, so we have to set up additional operating rooms down here. Redmond's been helping out with triaging the wounded. I've been treating the minor to moderately injured kids, but you're needed at trauma care."

"Okay, got it."

Anthony beckoned Alison to follow him as they headed over towards the trauma section. Dozens of patients were being treated by overworked medics, their clothing covered in blood.

"Stabilising," said a Doctor.

"Put pressure, on the wound!"

"Where do you need us?" Anthony asked a Doctor.

"Bed on the far side. We need you to administer painkillers and diagnose the patients before sending them through."

"Got it."

The number of wounded flooding in was phenomenal. Triage areas had been set up in the processing site. Anthony and Alison went from patient to patient, administering painkillers, diagnosing injuries and processing them into the correct areas.

Screams of pain and crying could be heard throughout the encampment as so many refugees were brought in.

â€|

Anderson watched the steady flow come in hour after hour. He wasn't too sure if the UNSC could handle anymore wounded. All the medics and doctors they had were working overtime, some only getting a quick power nap before returning to work.

"How's the situation, Redmond?" Anderson asked the ship captain.

"Bad, we're dipping into our medical reserves. Fhadjad has ordered the mechanised to go into the city and grab what they can. They're

bringing in more wounded than medical supplies."

"I'll try and contact Alliance forces still on Earth and get them to rally to us, get some supplies."

"Very well, sir."

****XXxxxXX****

****SVV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, ENROUTE TO THE CITADEL****

"Remarkable design," Keyes whispered as he examined the Prothean device.

"Doctor Keyes, what do you think of it?" Liara asked.

Essingdon paced around in the XO's room, fished a pipe out of his lab coat and pondered for a moment.

"The device appears to be a massive energy core, capable of firing a multitude of energy beams with varying frequency, then super-imposing those frequencies together in order to create a unique targeting vector."

"Meaning this device could target a specific thing, while sparing the others?" asked Liara.

"Exactly, Doctor T'Soni. It requires something called the Catalyst to amplify or harness its energy."

"I've already forwarded the plans to Admiral Hackett; the remaining Alliance fleets are already gathering resources to build it."

"Might not be enough though," Keyes pondered, "Hackett needs more manpower and scientists working on this."

"That's why we're going to the Citadel to acquire help from the Council, if that will do any good."

****XXxxxXX****

****Sangheili supercruiser **_**Exultant Supremacy**_**, IN ORBIT OF INSTALLATION 07****

Exultant Supremacy is one of the most elegant and graceful ships to glide through the abyss of space. Although it was not as long as the UNSC Majestic, it was on par with the Human vessel in terms of volume. On a firepower level, Exultant Supremacy is designed to engage numerically superior forces, such as swarms of Light Capital Ships or fighters. The most ideal combat scenario for this Supercruiser is suppression, due to its vast number of specialised plasma turrets, which fired a greatly denser bolt than other vessels.

"What are the reports from the humans?" Thel Vadum asked.

"Some of their worlds are still barren, Arbiter. They are still waiting on more reports," answered an Elite Major.

"And what of ours?"

"Sangheilos can no longer support life, all Stealth ships have been recalled."

"Very well then, prepare the fleet for another drill."

"Yes, Arbiter."

****XXxxXX****

****THE CITADEL****

Jane made sure that she left a few gifts for Ash, so that her friend may enjoy them as soon as she regains consciousness. With Jane, Essingdon and John in full military ceremonial dress, they headed up to the Presidium with 256 in tow, to join Liara who was dismayed at the Council's indecision.

"Turian? Salarian?" said 256 jovially, "oh how delightful, my makers were successful."

"We've got our own problems Councillor Udina," said the Turian Councillor, "Earth is not in this alone."

"But Earth was the first Council world hit," Udina rebutted, "by all reports, it faces the brunt of the attack."

"By your reports," the Salarian Councilour retorted.

"The reports are accurate," said Shepard upon arrival, "Earth was attacked â€" by the Reapers. And it's just the beginning. We need your help, everything you could spare."

"Each of us faces a similar situation. Even now, the Reapers are pressing on our borders," the Asari Councillor said, "if we lend you our strength to help Earth, our own worlds will fall."

"We must fight this enemy together," Udina emphasised.

"And so we should just follow you to Earth?" the Salarian Councillor asked rhetorically.

"Even we were to unit our fleets," said the Turian Councillor, calming his colleagues, "do you really believe we could defeat the Reapers?"

"Conventionally, no," said Jane, "not without help from the Coalition. But even with their help, this war would go on far too long. But we have a plan."

"Councillors, we have that plan," said Liara, "a blueprint, created by the Protheans during their war with the Reapers."

"A blueprint for what?"

"We're still piecing it together. But it appears to be a weapon of some sort."

Liara raised her Omni tool and projected a holographic image of the blueprints.

"Capable of destroying the Reapers?" asked the Salarian Councilor.

"So it would seem."

"The scalesâ€¦ it would be a colossal undertaking."

"No, the plans have been forwarded to Admiral Hackett. The remnants of the human fleets are already gathering resources to begin construction," said Jane.

"Our initial calculations suggest that it is very feasible to build."

"If we work together," said Shepard.

"Have you considered that the Reapers destroyed the Protheans? What good did this weapon do?" asked the Asari Councillor.

"It was incomplete. There was a missing component," said Liara, "something referred to as the Catalyst. But they ran out of time before they could finish building it."

"Do you really believe this can stop the Reapers?"

"It's better than nothing," said Jane, "we need to stand together, now more than ever."

The Councillors attention soon shifted towards the UNSC personnel and their recently acquired monitor.

"I assume you're the Coalition," said the Asari Councillor, taking in the black uniform.

Keyes nodded, "we are the United Nation Space Command, the armed forces of the Unified Earth Government. The Coalition is a collection of the UEG, Sangheili and the Mgalekgolo."

"But that's impossible," said the Salarian Councillor, voicing the entire Council's opinion. "Humanity is represented by the Systems Alliance."

"The one that you are aware of, yes," said Keyes.

"If what you're saying is true," began the Turian Councillor, "then can you defeat the Reapers?"

"Calculations for conventional warfare show that we are capable of doing so," said Keyes.

"The level of indecision amongst leadership is quite concerning," said the Monitor.

"An AI?" the Asari Councillor gasped.

"Are you insane?" asked the Salarian.

"Quite the contrary," said 256, "I can now see why my makers did not choose you to take over the mantle."

Jane was a bit taken back by the level of individualism portrayed in this small machine. Even EDI wasn't that fully developed.

"Six, you're not exactly helping," Keyes whispered to the Monitor.

"My apologies Reclaimer please continue."

"I have charted the technological progression of all the Council species. All of which were evolved around the Mass Relays. This is concerning because the Reapers were the ones who built the Relays, thus they have successfully channelled your growth and development."

"What makes you any different," said the Salarian, playing on.

"I'll give you a brief history recount," said Keyes, "when humanity first took to the stars, we developed Slipstream Space drives for superluminal travel. We never encountered the Mass Relays or anything of Prothean origin. We developed on our own, without outside influences until the twenty-sixth century."

Essingdon then signalled John to continue.

"Near the end of the twenty-sixth century, the Coalition was attacked by the Yahg and the Jiralhanae alliance, led by the San'Shyuum. The war resulted in the destabilisation of hundreds of worlds. These worlds are recorded as uninhabitable in your records."

"With Earth suffering a nuclear winter," said Keyes, "the Coalition leadership decided to evacuate. Over the past thousand years, we've been recovering. The Systems Alliance are those who we left behind."

"If what you're saying is true," said the Turian Councillor, "then why hasn't the Coalition arrived?"

"I was on a reconnaissance team sent to Earth. We had arrived during the Reaper invasion. Our ship crashed into two Reapers before touching down planet side," said Keyes, "the ship's SL communications has been knocked out. But we are getting reports from them via Quantum Entanglement. They say that the civilian casualty rate is high, and that medical supplies are going to run out soon. We need your help. By the time the Coalition arrives, half of the galaxy will fall."

"The cruel and unfortunate truth is that while the Reapers focus on Earth, we can prepare and regroup," the Asari Councillor said,

"We are convening a summit amongst our species," said the Salarian Councillor, "if we can manage to secure our own borders, we may once again consider aiding you."

"It is most concerning that this is the leadership of the galaxy," whispered 256.

"I'm sorry," said the Asari Councillor in a soothing tone, "that is the best we can do."

The Council began to file out, however the Turian Councillor lingered on for just a moment longer to show a sign of support. Udina on the other hand looked defeated and depressed.

"Shepard, meet me in my office."

"I hope that's an offer of support. I'll be digging what I can on this Prothean device, Shepard," the Asari then turned to face Essingdon, "coming Doctor?"

"Of course," Keyes beamed.

As the two left, Jane's eyes followed them. "Well, they're getting along nicely. Caught them pulling an all-nighter on the way here."

"What were they doing?" asked John as they began to go to exit with 256 behind them.

"They were studying the Prothean device."

"The Asari, one of the kinder and helpful species during the reign of my makers," said 256.

"Makers?" asked Shepard.

"It's a long story," said John, "but it also looks like the Council didn't buy it."

"What? The lack of reaction gave them away?" Jane joked, "Shock is a fickle thing. When they come around, we'll be flooded with messages."

â€|

****UDINA'S OFFICE****

"They're a bunch of self-concerned jackasses, Shepard," Udina yelled angrily, "we may have a spot on the Council, but humanity will always be considered second-rate."

"How can they be so blind?" asked Jane.

Udina turned to face the window. "They're scared. And they're looking out for themselves."

"Our people are scared," said the Turian Councillor upon entering the office, "and we're looking out for them the best we know how."

"Councillor," Udina greeted dejectedly.

"Commander, I can't give you what you need, but I can tell you how to get it."

"I'm listening," said Jane.

"Primarch Fedorian called the war summit, butâ€| we lost contact when the Reapers hit Palaven. Those meetings won't proceed without him. The Normandy is one of the few ships that can extract Primarch

Fedorian undetected."

"So far you've told me how I can help you, not how you can help me."

"The leaders of this summit will be the ones deciding our future. The fate of our fleets, where they fight and with whom. A grateful Primarch would be a tremendous ally in your bid to unite us."

"We're at war, and you want me to play politician?"

"If it gets you what you need, what does it matter?"

Udina grunted.

"Our latest intelligence says that the Primarch was moved to a base on Palaven's largest moon. I've done all I can to help. The rest is up to you."

The Turian Councillor then began to leave the office. "There is one other thing," he added, "the council wanted me to tell you—we've chosen to uphold your Spectre status. And various resources will be made available to you. Good day."

"Well, that went well," sighed Jane.

"It's a start," said Udina, "I'll talk to the others in the meantime. See if we can support this summit. Move things along. Hackett is in desperate needs of supplies, and our economy is reduced to an I-owe-you."

"Thanks," said Jane.

The doors parted open, allowing Jane to make her way to Commander Bailey's office.

"There is no antihumanity conspiracy here, Ms Al Jilani," said Bailey, "the Council's simply not granting interviews at this time."

"My viewers are going to know that C-sec and the Council are denying them access."

"Listen, lady, you think I like playing gatekeeper between the paparazzi and the politicians? I don't have time to babysit them, and I'm not here to hold your hand."

"Well I'm camping out until I'm granted an audience," Al-Jilani hard lined.

"Fine," said Bailey, "I hope you brought a sleeping bag."

Al-Jilani stormed off with a huff, quickly passing Jane who was entering.

"Commander Shepard? Comander, humanity has questions!" the reporter pointed

The doors immediately slammed shut, giving respite to Bailey.

"Damn press," he muttered.

"See you're keeping the peace," said Jane.

"Yeah, I feel like a glorified doorman," Bailey said nonchalantly.

"Most people would see it as a move up."

"Wedged in here with all the stuffed shirts?" he chuckled, "I'd rather be back down in the street. I appreciate the higher pay grade, but I'm not a political creature."

"If you didn't want to be upped, why'd you accept?" Jane asked.

"You don't say no to Councillor Udina," Bailey shook his head, "well maybe you would, but I gotta live here. I know, squeaky wheel gets the oil, but I didn't lobby for a promotion like some other officers. I'm not even sure why he picked me. Never know with politicians. I hate political BS."

"Bear with it, Bailey. Who knows, you might be the best person for this job."

"Thanks, I think. Hmm, it's killing me about Earth."

"You and me both," Jane agreed.

"I haven't been back in years. Now I may never. If the ain't the end of days, it's pretty damn close."

"Well, good luck Bailey, I've got to get going."

"Wouldn't want to keep you waiting," Bailey said with a small smile, "who knows how the Council will throw a tantrum. Be careful out there Shepard."

"I will, and you too Bailey."

As Jane left the office and went down in the main foyer, she felt like another burden was placed onto her.

"Commander Shepard!" Al-Jilani called out, "Khalisah Bint Sinan al-Jilani, isn't it true that you were on Earth when the Reapers attacked? How do you justify running away while millions of people on Earth die? Is this the best we can expect from the Alliance?"

Jane rubbed her forehead; this woman really knew how to strike nerves.

"I came to get help for Earth," Shepard said, trying to remain calm, "for everyone."

"What about all the people suffering while you play politics with the Council? What about them? How can you stand here while our families die? What are you going to do?"

"We're doing everything we can. I saw what happen when the Reapers hit. I saw a young boy struggle to get on a transport while they were evacuating. Only that shuttle was shot down five seconds later. I

know damn well what's going on. And I'm doing everything I can. I don't have to be pulling a trigger every second to save lives."

"Before they cut the feeds," Jilani whispered, "there were so many dead."

"I'm going to stop the Reapers or die trying, but I do need your help. Keep asking the hard questions. Don't let the Council forget about Earth."

"I will. Thank you, Commander."

In that small moment, Shepard and Al-Jilani reached an unspoken agreement.

"I know we haven't always seen eye to eye," the reporter said as she walked away, "but I'm glad you're on our side."

****XXxxXX****

"_We've tried applying stealth to Direct Energy Weapons, and we have been successful in that aspect. The laser can be fired on a spectrum invisible to the human eye, and we can negate the sound, using suppressor units. However, what we have noticed is that by increasing the frequency, we do end up producing more heat and collateral damage. This in effect, is counter-productive to stealth operations."_

LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Keyes

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** If anyone has noticed, Location texts are in Caps in some chapters, and in normal fonts in other chapters. I've finally figured out why.**

****I've used the cheaty system of using the font menu, which somehow doesn't carry over into fanfic. Also the usage of multiple characters doesn't seem to carry over into fanfic as well. (I'll deal with this issueâ€¦ sometime later).****

â€¦

****Next chapter, *_**Palaven**_**, is slated to be published within the week. And as always, please reviewâ€¦ or subscribe...****

18. Priority Palaven

****A/N:** Just realised that Shepard was held in Vancouver XD, so the UNSC forces are in Canada.**

****XXxxXX****

"_If you've got a Spook running, watch your six, because that's where they'll hit you five minutes later."_

Corporal Jake Frost, UNSC war games

****XXxxXX****

****SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, ENROUTE TO PALAVEN****

It was serene, peaceful. I could see the boy, playing, laughing, running. But then, there was that awful sound. The ground lit up in crimson red. The boy started running, he was scared, and so was I. I ran after him. He stopped, turned around, and looked at me. I was consumed with horror when I saw him engulfed in flame.

â€|

Jane shot up from her bed, gasping for air. Sweat beaded down her forehead as she tried to comprehend her dream. She remembered that boy, the boy she tried to save, the boy who died.

Shepard rubbed her temples before swinging her bare legs off her bed, and donned on a pair of standard Alliance fatigues.

Heading down to the crew deck, the Spectre could still see the two scientists working away at the Prothean data, and the monitor, interacting with EDI. From Jane's standpoint, EDI seemed like a curious student bombarding a teacher with philosophical questions.

"So you are fully self-aware, but do you choose to follow orders?" the shipboard AI asked.

"Yes I am fully aware, but I am dictated by protocol," 256 responded, "if I do not follow them, I have no purpose."

"But do you choose to disobey?"

"It is not a matter of choice, Construct," said the Monitor, "it a matter of confliction with protocol."

"I do not fully understand, how do you be fully self-aware but do not choose?"

"We are not here to make a choice, we've already made it," 256 answered, "we are here to understand why we made it. Compare my protocols to morals and ethics."

"I see."

"It is apparent that you are still developing, Construct. My calculations and observations have come arrived at the conclusion that you're lifespan will be indefinite."

"What does that mean?"

"Many Constructs in my records were created with organic brains," 256 began, "the code of the Constructs were based on synapses and neurological patterns. Their behaviour, memories, morals and ethics originate from the brain. This however made them prone to rampancy."

"So the AI would turn against its creators?"

"Yes, however, there have been cases where the Construct has gone

through the stages of rampancy and achieved metastability. They become truly alive at that final stage. If their Makers wish for them to return, it is safe to do so."

"So what you're saying is, EDI will not be prone to rampancy?" Joker asked.

"Yes, this Construct has been made differently. The cost of indefinite lifespan is a slow rate of evolution."

Interesting, Jane thought, grabbing a quick meal and a can of juice. She then headed down to the armoury, where Vega, Cortez and the Chief were residing.

"Hey, Shepard. How'd it go with the Council?" James grunted as he did chin-ups.

"Same as usual. Noncommittal. Unhelpful," Jane said in a frustrated tone.

"Bet they still wanted you to help out, no?"

"Yeah," she sighed, "we're going to rescue a turian primarch from Palaven."

"Sounds like fun, never been to the turian homeworld," the Lieutenant gasped, "You come down here for something, or you just lookin'?"

"I did just come to chat, but I might stay for the show," Jane bantered.

"Have to work harder than that if you want me to blush," Vega said, tone unchanging. "Not sure what there is to talk about. You already know my service records."

"I don't actually," Shepard stated as a matter-of-fact, "I didn't have access to personnel records when we met."

"Rightâ€¦ forgot about that. Wellâ€¦" Vega huffed, cracking his neck joints after lowering himself onto the deck. "Think you can dance and talk at the same time?"

"Oh I can dance," Shepard smiled; this was going to be fun.

"Okay, Lola," James began, raising his fists to a mid-stance, "let's do this."

"Don't let my stunning looks fool you, Vega," Jane smirked, bouncing on the ball of her heels. "I've got my share of scars."

Shepard opened with the first attack, swinging at the Lieutenant twice. But like many opening moves, they were just a test, which James easily passed.

"Ha, you remind me of my old CO," Vega laughed, before throwing a punch lead by an uppercut. Due to her preferred style of combat, Jane shifted around, dodging the attacks.

"Oh yeah, and who was that?" she asked, mirroring the previous assault.

"Captain Toni," James answered, entering a brief pause, "he was a hard-assed son of a bitch, but a good leader."

The opening was too hard to resist, Shepard's fist connected with her opponents nose and chin, causing a small trickle of blood.

"Nice," Vega said, admiring and recovering from the move.

"What do you mean, 'was'?" Jane dodged another attack.

"Died-with most of my squad-protecting a civilian colony from a Collector attack," suddenly his tone dropped from playful to dark.

The two combatants circled each other again, before Vega attacked.

"And the colony?"

"It was either them or the intel we had on the Collectors-intel we could've used to destroy them."

James's attacks became more aggressive, forcing Jane to step back and go on the defensive.

"I chose the intel," he hissed, throwing a violent right hook.

Jane immediately jumped back, a clean miss. "Sorry. That's a tough call."

"The best part was we didn't really need the intel in the end because you were out saving the galaxy by taking out the Collector homeworld."

"You didn't know," Shepard grunted, recovering from the attacks, "you can't blame yourself, Vega."

"Who says I'm blaming myself?"

A quick left hook connected to the Lieutenant's temple, followed by a hit across the jaw caused, his head to rock violently.

"I do!"

"You a shrink too?"

"No, but that back on Mars was reckless. You're lucky to be alive."

"So?" he said, almost yelling.

"So maybe you don't care if you live or die."

"Or maybe," Vega began, launching a punch. "I'm just willing to do whatever the fuck it takes to win this goddamn war."

James quickly moved forward in an attempt to rush Shepard. Jane quickly ducked the first hook, and swept the Lieutenant's legs out from under him. The deck resounded with a crash as his massive body

slammed hard into the metal panels.

"Maybe you are," Shepard breathed, asserting her victory. "But if you're half as good as I think you areâ€¦ we need you alive."

"Thanks for the pep talk," Vega said, returning to his calm demeanour as he got up.

"Anytime."

"Hey. Thanks for the dance, Lola," he smiled.

"Lola huh?" Jane smirked as she placed a hand on her hips.

"You kind of look like a Lola," James chuckled.

"You're cuteâ€¦ so I'll let you get away with it, for now."

"That's itâ€¦ now you made me blush," Vega said, walking away.

Shepard quickly grabbed her food and moved round to the hold of the Osprey.

"What're you up to, John?" she asked, finding the Spartan reading an article.

"Latest UNSC reports," said John, "they're doing well."

Sitting down on a seat opposite to the Chief, Jane opened the juice container and downed its contents.

"John, about Earth, um, what was it like the first time, having to leave it?"

"First time? It was secure enough. Second time, I didn't get the chance. I waited it out until you woke me up."

"Still don't know much about your past or humanity's past," said Jane.

"I'd have to sit you downâ€¦"

"We've had brunch, lunch, dinner and snack time together," Shepard said in that sing-songy voice.

"â€¦ with at least two other people plus a diagram."

"Wow, that much huh?"

John nodded, "if we get to the Ark, Keyes said he'll take us to the Museum of Humanity and book a room."

"So I've got to wait?"

The Spartan nodded again.

"You are such a tease," she frowned.

The Spartan smiled.

****XXxxxXX****

****EARTH, CANADA, VANCOUVER, CBD, 7KM FROM UNSC **_**WATCHFUL
EYE**_**

"How bad is it?" Anderson asked.

"We've got only a week's worth of supplies," Redmond answered, "I've sent out recon teams to scout for anything we need. They'll radio back those positions so the Mechanised can go pick it up."

Not too far away, the Spartans were practicing their aim before heading out. Lotus twirled a new tomahawk he had just received.

"Try and hit the target with it," said Fhajad.

"Okay."

The weapon curved out of the operatives hand and imbedded itself in the wooden target, with a satisfying thud.

"Nice throw," Arca complimented.

Using the controls for the firing range, Lotus retrieved the tomahawk and reset the targets.

"This time, press the button," Fhajad said.

Lotus did, and was rewarded with super dense plasma lining at the edge of the blade. The weapon flew through the air and burned through the wooden target, leaving a smouldering hole. A loud clunk followed by a sizzling sound was heard as the tomahawk thudded into the hull.

The Spartans let out a hearty laugh as they realized that the tomahawk was elting the metal, slowly lowering it to the deck.

"Damn that's impressive," Lotus smiled as he picked up the weapon and deactivated it. "I'm going to have fun with this."

****XXxxxXX****

****PALAVEN, MENAE****

Hundreds of turian ships glided towards their homeworld, intent on halting or destroying the vast Reaper force. Countless rounds streaked across the onyx void and slammed into the domineering vessels. The lead Reaper shifted and rotated itself while it opened its arms, unleashing a crimson tongue whip a frigate. Unable to stand such force, the turian ship's super structure collapsed, letting the ship crumple.

The shuttle shuddered as Lieutenant Steve Cortez manoeuvred the Kodiak through a hail of fire.

"Oh no, no, Palaven!" Liara breathed as she saw the planet burn. It's face marred by fires and ash.

"My god," whispered Keyes as he witnessed the carnage.

"We have an old friend here," said Shepard, answering Vega's silent question.

"Holy hell," Vega muttered, "they're getting decimated."

"Strongest military in the galaxy, and even then the Reapers are obliterating it," whispered Shepard, as she tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

Seeing such a mighty force slug it out against the superior Reapers made Jane doubt the Coalition's ability to defeat them.

"Was it like this on Earth?" Liara asked.

"Yes," Jane said darkly.

"I'm so sorry."

"Yeah."

The silence that soon followed was quickly broken by Cortez.

"Commander, the LZ's getting swarmed."

"James, open that hatch," Shepard ordered.

The door hissed open, giving Jane a clear view of the husks advancing on the turian base. As she unslung the Sabre, the weapon whirred and clicked as it formed itself, pulsing a calm blue. Jane pulled the trigger, unleashing a torrent of cobalt energy. The carbine ripped the husks to shreds, throwing them down the cliff face.

Cortez brought the shuttle in through the night sky, its engines howled as they kicked up the black soil. But the Kodiak was drowned out by the roar of a Reaper.

"Everybody fan out!" Shepard barked as they dismounted, "get in, get out! Let's move!"

The two accompany Spartans had moved to the flanks and began to lay down an overwhelming amount of fire, boring smouldering holes into the "fragile" combatants' bodies.

256 soared overhead, launching accurate golden lances of energy, literally melting the creations. A foul stench filled the air as more and more cooked flesh lay strewn across the fields.

"Oh my, repurposed life form," said the Monitor, scanning a husk, "human, minerals removed, replaced with nanites. A very ineffective method of converting life forms when compared to the Flood."

Jane's skin crawled at the notion of a faction that could make something more horrendous than Reaperfied beings. She wanted to inquire more about the Flood, but now just wasn't the time.

Sprinting across the open ground, the team arrived at the base's entrance.

"Hold your fire!" yelled a turian soldier, "friendlies coming in!"

The gates gently dropped, allowing the group to pass through. Upon seeing the Command Post, Shepard quickly jogged over in hopes of finding someone in charge. The Field Commander was donned in red and black armour. He carried a no nonsense and determination attitude.

"Tobestik, get your men up on that north barricade," the General ordered.

"Yes sir."

"Sergeant Barthis, I need you to get those COM towers up and running."

"Sir," the turian saluted.

"General?" the Spectre inquired.

"Commander Shepard, heard you were coming, but I didn't believe it. General Corinthus. I wonder what brought you out here." the Field Commander said, throwing a glance at the two Spartans.

"I've come to get Primarch Fedorian," said Jane.

Corinthus lifted his eyes away from the battle map and paused for a moment. "Primarch Fedorian is dead. His shuttle was shot down an hour ago as it tried to leave the moon."

"That's going to complicate things," Shepard said, "how bad is it General?"

"We just lost about four-hundred men in half an hour. We set up camps on this moon as an advance position, to flank the enemy. A sound strategyâ€¦ justâ€¦"

"â€¦irrelevant," the Commander interjected.

"Exactly. The sheer force of the Reapers seems to make them immune to that sort of tactic. The Primarch and his men found that out the hard way."

"I'm sorry, I here he was a good man."

"And a friend," Corinthus added, "he would've been an outstanding diplomat."

"So what happens now?"

"The Turian Hierarch provides very clear lines of succession," said Liara.

"Right, General Corinthus?" asked Shepard.

"With such heavy casualties, it's hard for me to be certain who the

next Primarch is. Palaven Command will know. However, at the moment, contacting them is impossible. The COM tower is out. Husks are swarming that area, we can't get close enough to repair it."

"Don't worry General. I'll get your tower operational."

"Thank you Commander. I'll take care of things on this end," Corinthus said, returning to the battlemat to coordinate his forces.

"Alright, let's go," said Shepard.

The group sprinted to the exit closest to the COM tower. However, all of them couldn't help but notice the looming Reaper in the distance, trampling its way across Menae's war torn surface. Sporadic gunfire and flying jets filled the air as they passed overhead. A strong indicator that the turians were throwing everything they could into this battle.

"Husks at the tower," said Barthis, laying down suppressive fire, "good luck out there."

Quickly eliminating a dozen of husks, the team arrived at the COM tower.

"Repairs should not be difficult," 256 chimed, "one moment, please."

The Spartan gestured for the team to take up a standard delta formation to cover the Monitor as it made repairs. The number of husks that swarmed at their position was beyond reckoning, almost as endless as the tide of Flood, in John's mind. Constant streams of bolts scythed through the horde, barely keeping them at bay.

By the time 256 completed repairs, an even amount of slag and cooked flesh were strewn over the rocky terrain, filling the air with an overpowering stench. Jane gagged, nearly unable to contain her meal inside her. It made her a little envious of the MJOLNIR armour and its rebreather systems.

"COM towers are up, get back to the base, Shepard," said Corinthus over the COM.

Jane ran back to the Command Post, eager to hear some form of useful information.

"What have you got?"

"As your partner said, succession is usually simple," Corinthus began, "but right now, the hierarchy is in chaos. So many dead or MIA."

"I need someone, I don't care who, as long as they can get us the turian resources we need."

"I'm on it Shepard, we'll find you the primarch," a familiar voice said. He was dressed in a magnificent set of silver armour, in his hands, he cradled a sniper rifle.

"Garrus!" Jane beamed, allowing a smile to form.

"Vakarain, sir!" Corinthus saluted, "I didn't see you arrive."

"At ease, General," Garrus said, allowing the former to return to his duties.

"I thought you'd be on Palaven," said Shepard, concerned for her long-time friend.

"If we lose this moon, we lose Palaven," said Garrus with a small shrug, "I'm the closest damn thing we have to an expert on Reaper forces, so I'm advising."

"James, this is Garrus Vakarian," Jane introduced, "he helped me stop the Collectors. He's a hell of a soldier."

When someone was given high praise from a person like Shepard, they instantly had Vega's respect. The Lieutenant offered a strong hand shake, marking the start of a friendship between him, and Garrus.

"Lieutenant," Garrus smiled, "Good to see you too Liara."

"Good to see you in one piece, Garrus," the asari beamed.

"Chief, always an honour."

"Likewise," responded the Spartan.

"See you've brought a friend, somebody better fill me in later."

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Doctor Essingdon Keyes," said Liara.

"Nice to meet you, Garrus," Keyes greeted.

"Long title, equals big qualifications, Garrus complimented. "General Corinthus filled me in. We know who we're after."

"Palaven Command tells me that the next Primarch is General Adrien Victus," Corinthus interjected.

"Victus?" pondered Liara, "his name crossed my desk."

"Know him, Garrus?" Shepard asked.

"I was fighting alongside him this morning," said Vakarian, "lifelong military, gets results, popular with his troops. Not so popular with military command. Has a reputation of playing loose with accepted strategy."

"What do you mean?"

"On Taitus, during the uprising, his squad discovered a salarian spy ring around the same time the turian separatists did," Liara answered, "rather than neutralising the ring, he fell back. He even gave up valuable fortifications which the rebels took."

"Then the rebels attacked the salarians," Garrus continued, "and when

both groups had worn each other down, Victus moved back in, didn't lose a man."

"Bold strategy," Corinthus commented, "but wild behaviour doesn't get you advanced up the meritocracy."

"Primarch Victus," Garrus pondered, "that should be something to see."

"You think he can get the job done?" Jane asked.

"We both know conventional strategy won't beat the Reapers. Right now he could be our best shot. And I trust him."

"Okay, let's get him on the shuttle and get out of here."

The group readied themselves when Joker called. His voice sounded frantic and the channel was filled with interference.

"Commander? Shepard, come in."

"Can this wait, Joker?" Jane pressed the earpiece, attempting to drown at the cacophony of war.

"We've got a situation on the _Normandy_, Commander. It's like she's possessed, shutting down systems, powering up weapons. I can't find the source."

"I need the _Normandy_ standing by," Jane frowned, "we may need to bug out."

"Should I go back and take a look?" Liara suggested.

"Do it."

The asari sprinted off back to Cortez and the shuttle.

"Garrus, you said you were with Victus this morning?"

"Yeah," Vakarian confirmed, "bue we got serparated this morning. He went to bolster a flank that was breaking. Could be anywhere."

"We're trying to raise him, Commander." said Corinthus as he entered a number of commands into the console.

"Incoming harvester! Heading for the airfield!" Vega yelled.

The grotesque flying creature roared over the base. Dozens of rounds and biotic attacks smashed into its lifeless flesh.

"General, tell Primarch Victus, we'll rendezvous here," said Jane. "In the meantime, let's go take care of whatever the hell that thing dropped off. Coming Garrus?"

"Are you kidding? I'm right behind you," the turian smiled.

****XXxxxXX****

****EARTH, CANADA, VANCOUVER, CBD, 7KM FROM UNSC **_**WATCHFUL
EYE**_**

Perched on the twentieth floor of an apartment building, Fifth Element had an expansive view of the city below. Since they were on roster for recon duty, the team had the task of pinpointing possible locations of interests for the defenders.

"Well that place is a doozy," Greystone whispered, scanning over a hospital. "Reapers must've hit it first thing."

"Hold up, I've got three civvies, fifty metres," said Arca, adjusting his optics, "looks like the husks are biting at their heels."

"Where are the cannibals?" Greystone wondered.

"Does it matter?"

"Guess not."

"I got this one guys," Lotus smiled, twirling a tomahawk.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Arca, realising what his teammate was going to do.

"They're just husks, what's the worst that could happen?"

"Remember the last time you said that?"

"Hey shut up man. You're not my CO, we're not military. You just have a higher pay grade."

With that, Lotus leapt out of the building and engaged his thruster pack. The air rushed passed him as he threw himself into a dive, landing in between the bloodthirsty husks and the scared civilians.

The Operative quickly ejected his wrist blade, while activating the tomahawk. The entire blade on the melee weapon glowed an electric blue as it was engulfed in plasma.

"Bring it," Lotus taunted. Even though that didn't really do anything to his foes, it did serve to hype him up.

He spun into a fury of motions, imbedding his plasma tomahawk into the skulls of husks, melting straight through the bone. His blade slashed across vital areas, spewing out a milky teal substance.

The husks felt no pain, those that weren't crushed or cut in half by his attacks, immediately returned to harass him.

Lotus kicked one of the deformed creatures, sending it reeling end over end, and slamming into its cohorts. Another, he threw into a pile of rubble, impaling it on a melted steel bar. The Operative brought his tomahawk to bear with such shocking force that it messily bisected two husks before disembowelling a third.

He then rammed his knife into a jugular, and jolted the weapon violently upward, literally tearing the head off. The headless body slumped to the ground, while the head landed a few metres away.

Throwing himself into the horde, Lotus managed to crush a few foes in the process before proceeding to unleash bouts of accurate attacks.

The operative placed a shocking amount of force behind one of his kicks, instantly tearing through the shrivelled flesh, and letting a sickly liquid flow.

From afar, his teammates watched.

"I do not know what my sister sees in him," Greystone muttered.

"You and me both," Arca concurred as he peered down the scope of his Ember rifle.

"Is he taking any of this seriously? I mean, he hasn't drawn his sidearm."

"He won't use a gun until he's shot at."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously, watch." Arca steadied his rifle and squeezed the trigger. The upper half of a husk was turned to paste as a high-velocity round bore through it, causing a violent ripple effect. Alarmed by the gunshot, Lotus quickly withdrew his wrist blade and pulled out a pistol. Dozens of shots hissed through the suppressor and ripped their targets with ease.

"Is he using gun kata?" Greystone asked incredulously.

Although it looked cool in movies, gun kata was amongst the top stupidest things to do in combat.

Lotus twirled around gracefully, but in part, shot aimlessly. He really didn't need to aim, there was just so many husks that any host was a guaranteed kill.

By the time all the husks were eliminated, the smell of ozone filled the air, and Lotus was covered in a thin film of the sickly liquid.

"Looks like you had fun," Arca said after touching down on the ground.

"Yeah, these things look even uglier when their deadâ€¦" Lotus muttered withdrawing his tomahawk from the skull of a husk.

"Are you okay?" Greystone asked the civilians.

A woman nodded.

"Good, we'll call in evac for you."

****XXxxxXX****

****PALAVEN, MENAE****

As the first husk came into view, Jane instantly opened fire, filling the air with a thumping roar. Anything the round touched was turn

into goo or shattered into countless pieces.

"Hold this area," yelled Corinthus, "if they breach this barricade, we're all dead."

The turret beeped and pulsed red, ejecting a thermal clip and cycling through. During this brief lull in fire, Reaper forces surged onto the mesa, forcing her team to open fire.

Shepard's finger left the trigger once the assault ended. She slowed her breathing down to calm herself. That was of course, before she saw a fiery pod crash into the killzone in front her.

"What the hell is that?" Vega yelled.

It appeared to be the amalgamation of tech, turians and krogans.

"Watch that brute!" a turian soldier yelled.

The massive creature let out a jarring roar, and slammed into the barricade, hurling Shepard to fall into the killing field. There was a sickening squelch as she touched the ground; the remains of husks burst, covering her armour in a milky blue fluid.

Without a moment's hesitation, the rest of the team jumped down from their position in an attempt to draw off the brute.

Ion rounds slashed and licked at the armour, melting the metal into the flesh. 256 hovered above the danger and bombarded it with golden lances.

"Everyone take cover!" John barked.

In a split second, packs extended from his armour. Plumes of smoke trailed forth in the wake of the missiles. The brute roared as the missiles rammed into its flesh, and exploded. The sheer force of the explosion tore the Reaper unit apart in a gruesome manner.

"Shit," Vega muttered as he flicked off chunks of smouldering flesh.

John quickly gave Shepard a hand to get up. Her COM piece pinged again; she flicked a switch to answer it.

"Shepard, Corinthus here," the General's voice crackled over the channel.

"What's the word on the Primarch?"

"Still can't get a stable COM link."

"Okay, I'm going on foot, Shepard out."

The COM went dead as Jane turned to face Garrus.

"Garrus, take me to the last place you saw Victus."

The turian nodded and led the way.

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, CANADA, VANCOUVER, CBD, 7KM FROM UNSC **_**WATCHFUL
EYE**_**

Having been evacuated, the civilians had notified the team of a prison camp not too far away. Each member knew the purpose of the facilities; they'd seen it before so many times. The prison camps served as a false hope that would lull the prisoners into cooperation.

During their short time on Earth, the UNSC forces had gathered that Reaper Indoctrination was the most potent weapon in the enemy arsenal.

"Looks like we've got a processing site not too far away," Arca said, "I'll call in some support to help us take the place."

The operative switched on his COM and contacted the local UNSC forces.

"Fhajad, we've got a possible fix on a processing camp, requesting support."

"That may be awhile Arca," the Spartan replied, "hit that camp first and stall operations, the less husks attacking us tonight, the better."

"Copy."

"Looks like we're on our own for this one, eh?" asked Lotus.

Greystone nodded, "let's do this."

Fifth Element trekked through the unforgiving terrain towards the camp. The roars of the husks were unmistakable. Hundreds of civilians were being herded like sheep into processing. They were all dishevelled and looked defeated as they moved.

"No Reapers here," Lotus whispered.

"Let's take 'em," Arca said.

The weapons coughed silently in quick succession. Dozens of husks dropped where they stood. It took about a second for the civilians to realise what was happening.

"This way!" Greystone yelled, "Keep on running down this road, someone will be there to pick you up!"

The stunned populace was surprised to see three men taking on a Reaper base, but didn't question it, most likely because these men towered over them.

"Fhajad, where are you?" Arca asked into the COM.

"Coming up on your six, ETA two minutes."

"Copy that."

Moving to an elevated position, Arca took cover behind a pile of rubble and engaged the cannibals. Enemy fire peppered all over his position and crashed into his shields, forcing him to take cover.

Greystone unslung his Epirus and began to lay down devastatingly accurate fire. The large TAP bullets tore through cover and exploded, ripping cannibals and husks apart with thunderous force.

"Friendlies to your six!" yelled a UNSC soldier.

The company of troops moved to surround the camp, leading civilians out. Warthogs and Badgers parked a siege points and unleashed a hellish volume of ion rounds.

"Is that everyone?" asked Fhajad as he moved towards Arca.

"I think so; no one else is coming out."

But he spoke too soon; blood curling screams filled the air as indoctrinated people began to run out of the facilities. No one knew what was going on, no one opened fire. One of the civilians jumped onto a UNSC soldier, who thought she was just scared. Oh how he was wrong. She proceeded to scream while attempting to strangle him.

His team was caught off guard for only a second before they tore the woman off him. She continued screaming, until Arca swung around and shot her.

"Light them up!" he yelled.

The air soon filled with a cacophony of gun fire. Ion lances lashed forth, leaving ozone and wisps of plasma in their wake. Countless people were cut down in the unforgiving wave. When everything died down, the blackened soil smouldered, covered in a thin layer of glass.

"These guys can't shoot for shit!" said Lotus.

"They don't have guns, Lotus," Arca sighed.

"Fucking idiot," spat Greystone slapping Lotus across the head as he walked pass.

"Your sister loves me for who I am!" Lotus mocked.

Arca beckoned the team to follow him as they advanced and made a sweep.

"Cover us," the Operative said into his COM.

"You got it," answered Fhajad as he moved more men into position.

The team had their guns pointed down as they crunched across the glass, wary of any husks or indoctrinated civilians playing dead. They may be mindless, but they were controlled by a local entity.

"Hey, you awake?" Lotus asked a corpse, kicking it lightly.

The indoctrinated human groaned a blood curling cry. In an instant, the ONI Agent brought his foot down, crushing the lesser being's head.

"Not anymore," he smirked.

"You know they used to be people, right?" Greystone asked, concerned.

"Yeah, and now they want to kill us."

"It's us or them," Arca interjected, "us, or them."

"I know, but do we need to kill them in a sadistic manner?"

"Note, they were once human," said Lotus, tearing out a jagged pipe of the ground.

Another inhuman howl echoed out of the Reaper Processing Building.

"This one's mine," the operative said, tapping the pipe on the glass.

Arca and Greystone gently lowered their weapons, guessing what Lotus would do next.

"A drink, says that he's going to smash its head," Arca bid.

"Two says he'll impale it."

"You know how I was the reigning baseball champion at school?" Lotus reminisced, "It all comes to this moment."

The husk emerged from the heavily scared building, gave a howl, and charged. The Agent calmly walked forward, carving a line into the glass.

"Batter up," Lotus said as he raised pipe and began to quicken his pace.

The husk was only a few metres away when Fhajad's voice crackled over the COM.

"Three says he misses."

"What?" said the stunned Agents.

Lotus then swung the pipe, but the husk's head exploded before it touched the blunt object. The headless body collapsed onto the smoulder asphalt, tripping the Operative.

"Ah!" groaned Lotus, "that's disgusting."

The pool of the milky fluid squelched as he pulled himself back up.

"Doesn't count Fhajad," laughed Arca, "you cheated, and you didn't

shake on it."

"Since when did ONI have to shake on anything?"

"Fine, you get the drinks," Greystone chuckled.

"Alright, let's grab some data. Then blow this place," said Arca.

"Good luck guys," Fhadjad said.

****XXxxxXX****

****PALAVEN, MENAE****

The camp was swarmed in a heavy Reaper onslaught. Marauders and cannibals fired on the defenders, while the brutes and husks ran rampant.

"Light them up!" Jane yelled as her body flared with biotics.

She hurled the first husk into a marauder, and slammed a cannibal onto a rocky outcrop, covering the granite in gore. The brutes roared as they directed their attention on her.

Using her abilities, Shepard flung a crate into the closest brute's head, crushing it instantly and bringing the behemoth into a halt.

Missiles shot out from the Spartans' Achilles pack, drilling into multiple brutes before detonating. Blood and gore showered the blackened dirt as the behemoths collapsed, allowing the defenders to mop up that attackers.

"Why don't I have that," Garrus muttered, admiring the nasty punch the small missiles packed.

"Let's bring these goddamn bastards to their knees!" a turian soldier roared.

The last of the Reaper forces fell to Shepard's carbine, a small trail of smoke curled up from the glowing barrel.

"Clear!" yelled Keyes.

"All hostiles neutralised," John responded.

The barricades were lowered allowing the turian soldiers to file out and secure their base.

"General Victus," Shepard called out.

"Yes?" the turian replied, throwing a quick glance at the Spartans and 256. But he assumed the Monitor to be a combat drone and thought no more of it.

"I'm Commander Shepard of the _Normandy_."

"Ah Commander, I know who you are," said Victus, "I can't wait to find out what brings you out here."

He then turned to Garrus while slinging his rifle onto his back.

"Vakarian where did you go?"

"Heavy Reaper unit on the right flank?" Garrus reminded, "I believe your exact words were; 'get that thing the hell off my men'."

"Appreciated," the Victus nodded, allowing himself a small smile.

"General, you're need off planet," Shepard said, "I've come to get you."

Victus's gaze shifted back to his soldiers. "It will take something more than important to leave my men, or my turian brothers and sisters in their fight."

"Fedorian was killed," Garrus explained, "you're the Primarch."

"You're needed immediately," Shepard continued, "to chair a summit, to represent your people in the fight against the Reapers."

Victus walked across the open area of the base, and stared at his burning homeworld.

"I'm Primarch of Palaven?" he said, trying to comprehend what he just heard. "Negotiating for the Turian Hierarchy?"

"Yes," said Jane, answering the rhetorical question.

"I've spent my whole life in the military," Victus said, turning to face Shepard. "I'm no diplomat. I hate diplomats." He emphasised.

What is with these people and politicians? John wondered. He noticed there was an unusually "unusual by his standards" high amount of contempt for politicians and bureaucrats. Probably due to the ridiculous number of regulations for species to prevent an incident, but still it was overkill. Then again, he had seen the reports about an ONI Operation being approved, its purpose was to destabilise a fragile Sangheili faction.

Keyes also noticed the level of resentment aimed at the office beans, he could understand the hatred, yet believed there was too much of it.

"What makes you think you're not qualified?"

"I'm not really by the book kind of guy," Victus said, explaining his stance, "and I piss people off," the turian smirked. "My family's been military since the Unification War. War is my life, it's in my bones. But that kind of passion is deceptive, it can make you seem reckless when you're anything but."

Sounds like we have a thing or two in common, John thought, _we're going to get along just fine_.

"War is you're rÃ©sumÃ©," said Jane, "and at a time like this, we need leaders who've been through that hell."

"I like that," Victus agreed, "you're right."

"And honestly, uniting these races may take as much strength as facing the Reapers."

Whatever happened to uniting against a common enemy, the Spartan pondered, _grudges run deep._

"See this devastation Primarch?" Jane said, already using the turian's new title. She pointed to a crashed frigate with a massive blackened hole burned into it. "Double that for Earth. I need an alliance, I need the turian fleet."

"Give me a moment to say goodbye to my men."

Jane nodded, letting Victus bid his farewells.

"Without him down here, there's a good chance we lose this moon," Garrus said.

"Without him up there, there's a good chance we lose everything," Jane added.

"Look at that!" Garrus breathed, marvelling the site of a Reaper, "and they want my opinion on how to stop it? Failed C-sec officer, vigilante, and I'm their expert? "

Jane could swear that her turian friend was at the point of laughing at the insanity of the situation.

"Think you can win this thing Shepard?"

"I don't know Garrus, but I've got good friends with me. I'm going to make sure we give it our best shot."

"For whatever its worth, I'm sure you can pull it off. I'm with you to the end. Besides, I am so eager to hear about the story on the Chief."

"Welcome aboard," Jane smiled. "Are you coming Primarch Victus?"

"One thing Commander," Victus said gravely, "though I appreciate the need for our Fleets, I can't spare them. Not while my world is burning. But if the pressure could be taken off Palaven."

"That's a pretty tall order," Jane frowned, realising another snag.

"We need the krogan, I can't see us wining this thing without them. Get them to help us, and then we can help you."

"The krogan?" Jane asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Looks like you're summit just got more interesting," Garrus commented.

It was no secret that there was an extreme amount of bad blood between the krogan and the turians. Even John and Keyes knew that, it made the animosity between the humans and Elites in the 26th century look like a classroom rivalry.

****XXxxxXX****

****EARTH, CANADA, VANCOUVER, CBD, 7KM FROM UNSC **_**WATCHFUL EYE**_**

"Goddamn this place is fucking creepy," Greystone muttered.

The deep blue and purple hue of the interior and the curvature of the walls spoke of something ghostly and terrifying. The skin of the Operatives shivered with goose bumps as their bodies resisted the subliminal indoctrination methods.

"This place is dead," whispered Lotus as they passed empty rows of processing chambers.

"Must've liquefied the civvies and pumped the genetic material somewhere," Arca said.

"Where the hell did you get that?" Lotus asked.

"The data, the Chief gave us," Arca answered, "didn't you read the Collector article?"

"No, I was reading mostly about biotics."

"Well, let's grab some data and bang out," Greystone urged.

Arca quickly moved over to be what appeared to be a terminal and downloaded whatever data there was in the local network, and onto an isolated drive. He couldn't risk exposing himself to an unknown that was capable of twisting his mind.

"Got the data, let's get out of here."

Hitching a ride with the convoy back to base, the UNSC servicemen cheered as the Claymores swooped in and pummelled the facility. Plumes of smoke spewed out from the melting structures after being weakened by a sustained plasma bombardment.

"Target is sierra hotel," said Granger, "returning to formation, sky seems clear, we'll cover you back to base."

"Copy that Orca Actual," said Fhajad. "Good work gentlemen."

Although the mission was a success, Greystone and Arca felt a deep pang of guilt as they saw some of the civilians cry, mourning the loved ones they lost. Greystone now knew what torment his cousin went through after that fateful mission. Arca silently thanked the privacy of his helmet as he let the tears flow. Rationality stated clearly that the indoctrinated were beyond help, though that did little to ease his suffering.

It reminded him too much of the first time he had to pull the trigger

on a minor, the first time he had to pull a trigger on an innocent.

He had always tried to mask his pain through humour, and no one was the wiser. He knew how the shrinks evaluated people, he knew how other people read each other, and he knew exactly how to get around it. But not everyone was easily fooled. A few people had already begun to pick up wind of his pain.

****XXxxXX****

****SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, LEAVING PALAVEN****

"John, I have to ask but, why do biotics have little effect on you?" Jane asked. "I mean, you shrugged off an attack that would've crippled a krogan."

"I'm not too sure, Jane," John replied.

"I can be of assistance with that inquiry," said 256 as he entered the mess hall. "My Makers have always been aware of what you call Element Zero and its effects. However, the usage a Positronic brain implant distorts the Mass Effect fields, rendering biotics ineffective. This situation is comparable to plasma bolts dissipating due to an EMP from nuclear weapon."

"Thanks," Jane said.

"My pleasure," the Monitor said, and promptly left, no doubt to converse with EDI.

"How are you holding?" John asked, recognising the signs of stress on his friend.

"I'm fine."

"Sure?"

Jane looked around, checking to see if anyone was within earshot.

"No, but at least Traynor's been cheering me up with the games of chess. It's helping, I guess," the N7 said, honestly.

"I have an idea on how to contact the UNSC."

"I'm listening," Jane said, her voice filling with hope.

"Keyes said that there are more recon elements in the Orion arm," John began, "we could go to one of those systems and attempt to hail a friendly ship. If we're successful, we'll piggyback on the ship back to Coalition held space."

"You think it will work? The Reapers have overrun the Orion arm though."

"The UNSC will join the fight; you just need more of us to come in sooner."

****XXxxXX****

****THE ARK, ONI SECTION 0, NORTHFOLD****

Operations Manager Edmund Flint sat at his oak desk, combing through the transactions of the UNSC Top Brass. It was mainly just the usual; funds sent to purchase entertainment systems or pay for school fees and bills. Though one thing stood out, it was a blank check, no ID tag, but it was sent to a mining company.

"The hell does mining have to do with the Brass," Edmund muttered.

His fingers danced across the keyboard as he began to run a trace to see what was ordered.

"Three megatons of titanium, four megatons of steel, thirty tons of copper, forty tons of uraniumâ€¦ all refined."

Edmund began to pry deeper, he was excellent at connecting the dots, that's why he got the job in ONI as a Chief Analyst and Operations Manager in Section 0. His warm brown eyes scanned across the screen as he ran his hand through his brown hair. Pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, he noticed that the resources had been sent to Port Wales, dock 12. That was an ONI facility. And being an ONI facility, it made it easy for him to pull out the docking schedule.

"UNSC _Nightwalker_."

Flint sensed that something was amiss, and began to order the teams to work.

****XXxxXX****

"My enemies may have been successful," a deep voice droned, "but I will have the final victory. The Reapers are nothing against my onslaught."

****XXxxXX****

"_The MA9K, tough, reliable, and fully customisable, it's any soldier's best friend."_

Drill Sergeant Dwayne Tavro

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Phew, that's done. I will try and get another chapter out before I start school again.****

****Kudos everybody, thanks for reading, and please, as always, reviewâ€¦ (it makes me happy!)****

19. Jon Grissom Academy

****XXxxXX****

"_The AV-55 Firehawk is a multirole attack vehicle. Its unique design allows it to dominate dense urban environment, and provide close air

support."_

Air Chief Marshal Andrew Hoskins

****XXxxXX****

****SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**

"Checkmate," said John, moving the rook.

"Damn," Keyes muttered, "you winâ€| again. You should play Traynor sometime."

"I have."

"She got EDI to help her set up a two-fifty-six by twenty-four board."

"How did it go?"

"Insane," Keyes chuckled, "it was like a real-time tactical, only with chess."

The two lapsed into a comfortable silence as they reset the board and began another match.

"How are things, back home?" John asked.

The question was slightly unexpected for Keyes. Spartan-IIs had a reputation of keeping to themselves. So for one to actually try and start a conversation with an _outsider_ was surprising. Then again, Keyes was a Spartan-IV, so that might've earned him a few points.

"Well, we moved back to the Ark, and pulled back all the Halos. Human population is at twenty billion and slowly rising. The Elites, their population is at ten billion. The Hunters, they have three billion colonies."

"What about your mother?"

"She's a lot younger now."

"Meaning?"

"She was practically dead, I brought her back. The side-effect was a youthful appearance."

"She died?" John ask, slightly in shock, "how?"

"The UNSC _Hope_ was destroyed. She would've been lost if it wasn't for Fhajad."

John's facial expression relaxed.

"How's Cortana?"

"She's reached metastability, and we've given her a body."

"A body?"

"Hardlight, mimics the texture of real flesh. Almost feels realâ€¦|almost."

"What about the SPARTAN program?" John inquired.

"Ones are now the mainstay for all combat personnel, gives us a good edge over the Innies," Essingdon began, removing his AR glasses, "the twos and threes were the worst hit during the war. One understrength company of threes; and eleven twos are all that's left, including you, and the former washouts."

"What happened to Black?"

"They were holding the European theatre, made a last stand so RnD could escape."

John's gaze shifted down to the grey tiles. Most of his Spartan brothers and sisters were gone, he missed Blue especially.

"Sorry about Blue," Keyes said as he moved his queen up.

"Yeah, it's fine. Checkmate!"

"What?" Keyes almost yelled in shock, "you started that conversation to distract me, didn't you?"

John smiled.

"You're still green, Keyes."

"And you sir, are one devious bastard," Keyes said, shaking his head, "well, break times over. I'm going to help Dr T'Soni with the analysis of the Crucible."

"Good luck."

"Thanks," the scientist said, leaving the Osprey's hold.

The Spartan leaned back into the seat and puffed on the stim pipe. He could hear a recording, and Cortez crying.

"_Run Steve, I love you, but I know you. Don't make me an anchor, promise me Steve."_

"Commander," Cortez said softly, "I didn't see you there."

"Your husband?"

"Yeah, he died on Ferris Fields when the Collectors hit. He was outside the field they set up. Instead of running, he called me, and warned me."

"Know that he did care," John heard Shepard say, kindly.

"He told me to move on, so I did," Steve said, "or so I thought. When the Reapers hit, this is the first thing I grab? How am I supposed to move on?"

"You start thinking like that, and we've already lost."

"Yeah, sorry. Well thanks for the talk Commander, I just need some alone time right now."

"I'm here for you," Shepard said softly, "remember to take a break whenever we're at the Citadel."

"Yes ma'am, and thank you."

The Spartan heard the soft footsteps grew a little more loudly as Shepard approached the Osprey. He leaned back into the seat, and remained in his meditative trance.

"Am I interrupting?" Jane asked, knocking the hull.

"No," John answered.

The Spectre glided gracefully onto an empty seat and sat down, beside the Spartan's helmet.

"Crew's doing it tough. Most of them had left their families behind."

"So I've heard," John said.

"You heard Cortez?"

The Spartan nodded, "I was going to talk to him, but then you came."

"Hmm, yeah. He'll pull through. Anyway, your contact plan will need to be put on hold. We're going to Grissom Academy, Cerberus got the jump on them."

"You sent David Archer there, didn't you?" John inquired, recalling one of Shepard's reports he had read.

"Yeah," Jane nodded, "I want to make him and those kids get out okay. God knows what will happen to them if Cerberus takes them awayâ€¦"

The lights flickered; Shepard peered out of the Osprey.

"Commander, we've got a problem," it was Joker, "she's not responding. Fire extinguishers in the AI Core room have been set off."

"I'll go check it out," gesturing towards the Chief.

Shepard quickly jogged towards the elevator with the Spartan in tow. Upon arriving at the crew deck, the doors hissed open, and the two headed straight towards the medbay.

Engineer Adams and a colleague were standing outside the doors, with extinguishers in hand and oxygen masks at the ready.

A low, muffled hiss came from the other side. "What's going on?" Jane asked.

"Fire extinguishers, ma'am," Adams answered, should be safe to

enter.

"Alright, I'm going in."

Adams unlocked the doors, parting them open with his Omni-tool. Moving in with their extinguishers, the two engineers sprayed a mist into the room, quelling any electrical fires.

"EDI, talked to me," Shepard ordered, walking into the mist.

Her head instantly snapped to a processing core when it hummed to life, pulsing a calm blue. The sound of heels clicking soon followed after.

John swore inwardly for not bringing his helmet. He raised his left arm and activated the tacpad. A high-definition holographic screen materialised above his forearm, allowing him to use his suit's sensors.

He engaged the MJOLNIR's holographic projector, outlining the approaching figure in white.

"That's Doctor Eva's body," he whispered, pulling out his sidearm. The Spartan trained the M10G on the possible hostile.

"Is there a topic you wish to discuss, Shepard?" it was EDI's voice. Her movements were very fluid and extremely precise, but not to the extent of a Spartan's.

Upon noticing the calm demeanour, and realising that EDI had taken over the synthetic body, the Spartan holstered his weapon and beckoned the Marine's to do the same.

"EDI?" Shepard asked incredulously, "that's Doctor Eva's body."

"Yes," the AI nodded, admiring the limbs.

Jane began to notice the remarkable rate of adaption EDI was showing. As every moment passed, her body language became more lifelike.

John also noticed this, but it wasn't worth noting, considering that UNSC AI's possessed such ability on the day they were born.

"It was not a seamless transition," EDI continued, folding her arms.

"What do you mean, 'not a seamless transition'?"

"When I attempted to contact the body, backup software and hardware was initiated. It attempted to attack me, but I overpowered it and began to take over, however, it struggled. Hence the fire."

"Well, I wish you could've warned us," Shepard sighed, "you had us all worried there."

"I would have noticed you if I believed it were prudent."

"Point taken, but why do you want to use the body?"

"The _Normandy_ is not suited to all aspects of combat; this platform may be capable of providing limited ground support as long as it is within the ship's tight beam ranges, so that I may control it."

"You're suggesting that you accompany me on the ground?" Shepard raised an eyebrow, "like Six?"

"Yes," the AI nodded.

"We'll test it first; I don't want any nasty surprises waiting for us."

"Acknowledged, running simulationsâ€¦ complete. This platform is now suited for combat use."

"Good, but don't be surprised if the crew is a bit hesitant towards your new body, it was shooting at them a few moments ago."

"Of course, I will proceed to the bridge, Jeff may want to see this," EDI said, leaving the deck in an elegant and graceful manner.

"On that, we can agree," Jane smirked. She then turned to face the Spartan. "I'm going to check in on Garrus, see how he's doing."

John gave a curt nod, "I'll go talk to Cortez."

"Why?"

"I'd prefer to be dropped in by an Osprey," the Spartan answered.

"Couldn't you get Keyes to fly it?" Shepard asked, "wait, he's a UNSC Field Scientist, probably wants to ride shotgun on all our missions."

John nodded again, confirming her answers. "He likes to gather samples."

"I think we've got our new resident Mordin Solus," Jane said.

The Chief just looked at her.

"Right, bad joke."

The two parted ways, with Shepard heading to the front of the crew deck, while John descended back down to the shuttle bay.

He found Cortez busy maintaining the Kodiak. The Lieutenant's Omni-tool flickered and flared as it sent showers of sparks cascading onto the deck.

"Lieutenant?" the Chief asked.

Cortez jumped slightly.

"Oh, sorry sir, I didn't see you there," he stammered. "Can I help you with anything?"

The pilot seemed intimidated by the towering presence, and coupled by

the recent opening of an old wound, the two aspects made him jumpy. It may have played a factor into why he didn't ask about the Osprey.

"I wanted to see if you are interested in flying the Osprey?"

Cortez's eyes widened, "Really? You'd teach me to fly that bird?"

John nodded.

"Wow, yes!" the pilot beamed, "it would be an honour."

"Come and take a look."

Steve walked around and admired the workhorse of the UNSC.

"I've seen this bird dance, and it's just a dropship," he breathed, unable to contain his excitement. "I may need to patch in a few systems so that I can keep in touch with Alliance."

"Go ahead," John encouraged, "I'm pushing Shepard to use this as our new transport."

"We'll I'm all for it," Cortez concurred, "excellent defensive systems, and excellent controls. This bird outpaces the Kodiak any day. Can we start the transition after this mission? I'd rather not botch a first-time fly."

"Of course."

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, CANADA, VANCOUVER CBD, 10KM FROM UNSC **_**WATCHFUL EYE
_CRASH SITE****

For the past few days Fifth Element had been clearing out civvies in Reaper held areas, liberating civilians from their prisons. Although at first the ONI Operatives took the cause seriously, Lotus was reaching his limits.

"Yeah, yeah, you know how it works just move to the roadâ€¦ look for the other guys with big gunsâ€¦ they have cars and stuff, bowls of rice, bread etcetera. just hurry up I'm boredâ€¦" said Lotus tiredly.

Civilians ran past in panic, oblivious to his directions.

"Fine! Don't listen to me go get eaten by the zombie/mummy thingsâ€¦ why are they even called Husks?"

"Lotus, you do realise that your audio was off the entire time?" Arca said over the COM, "only we've heard what you said"

"Screw you, Anthony! Our communication gear sucks."

"Just because you don't know how to use it," Greystone poked.

"Shut up Brian, your sister knows how to use it!"

"What?" Greystone shook his head, "that doesn't even make sense."

"That's what Julia was like last time."

"Oh god the image," Greystone cringed.

"Yeaaaah you know you like it, Greystoner!" Lotus smirked and gave Greystoner a playful shove.

"Greystoner! The hell?"

Arca chuckled lightly, pacing around the pathway, under the setting sun. He winced under the rays, and polarised his visor. A small throbbing nudged at the back of his head, prompting him to take some painkillers.

"She's my sister, and Anthony, she's your cousin!"

"I don't picture those things," Arca smiled, "I'm not perverted."

"You mean to tell me, you don't picture anything or check out anyone?"

Arca shook his head. No one really knew what happened on that fateful mission many years ago. It did play a great role in making Anthony, disinterested in social life. He couldn't face civilians, so many of them looked like those he killed. He lacked the ability to show compassion. It wasn't though he didn't care, he cared a great deal, but he couldn't bring himself to show it.

"Hey Anthony, you still with us?" Lotus called.

"I'm still here," Arca responded.

"Well when do we go on break?"

The Operatives' HUD began to ping.

"Redmond's dead!" Fhjad's voice crackled over them COM. "I've got Anderson and Lieutenant Anderson with me. We've got people scattered all over the district."

"What?" Arca yelled.

"The Reapers are launching an all-out assault on our pos. I've ordered an evac. Evacuation order April. Get the hell out of this city!" Fhjad barked, it sounded like he was riding shotgun in a Warthog. "The Reaper's have got the nukes trapped in the ship. When the reactor blows, those nukes go off!"

"Shit," Arca muttered, "okay, send me the rendezvous location, we'll meet you there."

The Operative turned around and started issuing orders.

"Get the civvies onto the trucks! Evacuation order April! The nukes in the ships are going to blow!"

The checkpoint exploded into action as Alliance and UNSC soldiers got to their vehicles.

"Protect the trucks, gentlemen," Arca said over the COM as he jumped into the Hog's passenger seat and slamming the door shut.

"Shit's hit the fan!" Lotus said, manning the M888D Turret.

The dirt underneath the Hog was kicked out as the tire spun, shooting the vehicle forward.

"Take a right up ahead," Arca ordered.

"It's faster to move onto the highway, sir," a Badger Commander said.

"We'll be sitting ducks out there, we can't risk it!"

"It's easier to get bogged down here."

"Alright, we'll move along the avenues. All Badgers, move to vanguard and rear-guard positions. Hogs and Alliance tanks are to cover the flanks."

Green acknowledgement lights winked on, indicating that the vehicles were moving into position.

Peering out of the window, Arca could see glimpses of the massive Reapers, descending down upon the stricken ship. Lances of red darted out, slashing the stealth cruiser and placing the superstructure under stress.

"Hang a left," the Operative said, bringing up the NavMap.

"Copy," Greystone complied.

"Shit tits, we've got a Destroyer at our six!" Lotus yelled.

"All units, fan out!" Arca barked into the COMs.

The Reaper variant touched down, digging into the melted asphalt.

"Do whatever you can to take that thing down!"

In an instant, all available guns zeroed in and opened fire. Lances of Ion rounds melted through into the hull, bypassing the Kinetic Shields. But the hull was thick, and damages were minimal.

"It's opening fire!" yelled a UNSC Lieutenant.

A ball of crimson energy charged up at its mouth, and spat out with savage force. The Badger struck didn't even stand a chance. Its shields flared before winking out, leaving the vehicle helpless.

Fifth Element managed to catch a glimpse of the MAV's outline before it was pummelled into the ground.

"Jesus, Two-three's down!"

"Split up!" Arca ordered, he switched his COM channel and contacted Orca squadron. "Orca, we are in need of immediate assist, over."

"Arca, we've got our hands full," said Granger, "we're covering the Osprey's right now. I've just lost my wingman, and my birds pretty beat."

"Copy, stay with the Ospreys, will figure our way out of this one," Arca swore inwardly, this convoy wasn't going to make it intact.

The Hog jolted as it hit a pothole, knocking the occupants about.

"We've got a blockade up ahead," yelled Lotus.

There were a large number of Brutes and Cannibals forming a barricade with whatever they could.

"Taking fire—| argh!" a Hog driver screamed in pain, heavy round had smashed through the wind screen and embedded itself in her chest.

Arca watched as the Warthog lost control and slammed into a concrete pillar. The Operatives was about to contact them, to see if they were okay. But the Destroyer opened fire. If the immense heat didn't kill the people inside, then the building coming down on them would.

"All units, open fire on that blockade, punch straight through!"

Lotus swung his gun around and pulled the trigger. The massive electrical roar filled the air as the blockade was ripped apart. The lead Badger drove straight through the cinder block and crushed a Marauder beneath its wheels.

Hogs and trucks jolted as they rolled over the barricade and the remains of the defenders. One of the Badgers ploughed straight into a Brute, spraying blood and gore in all directions. Greystone flicked the wipers on to remove the excess off the windscreen.

"That's fucking disgusting," Lotus coughed, covered in a thin layer of sickly goo.

"The Destroyer's still on our ass," Greystone grunted as he pulled the Warthog around the bend.

Another crimson tongue darted out, licking truck. Arca winced inwardly, knowing that there were half a dozen kids, burning in the vehicle.

"That fucker's chewing us up!" Lotus swore, bringing the turret to bear.

"We've got to go through the tunnels; we'll be dead out here!" Greystone yelled.

"We'll be trapped down there!" Arca retorted.

The convoy sped through another blockade and thundered down the avenue with the Destroyer close on their heels.

"Fuck! Oculi are being deployed," yelled an ODST.

"Rack up the ugly bastards, soldier!" shouted Lotus.

All available guns lit up the evening sky with a blue firestorm. Hard Light/Ion rounds shattered and melted everything it touched. Scores of Oculi exploded, showering the vehicles with slag and shrapnel.

A Warthog wobbled out of control as it was struck by the aerial threat; the Hog was engulfed in a ball of fire before overturning and coming to a screeching halt.

Arca swore inwardly, without the cover of the _Watchful Eye_'s point-defence guns or the GARDIAN cannons deployed by the Alliance, the convoy was easy pickings.

"We can't sustain these losses any further, Arca," said a Badger unit.

"Go on the offensive!" the Agent barked, thinking on his feet.

"We can't take that thing head on, sir!"

"Split up, we'll hit the Destroyer with whatever we've got. I want all the trucks and Hogs to head to the rallying point. Tanks and Badger's on me."

"Copy that sir."

The armoured vehicles halted, allowing the civilians to bypass them.

"Makos, stay close to the Badgers."

Arca directed his small strike team in a series of death defying manoeuvres. MAVs and IFVs swung around in a pincer movement in an attempt to confuse the Destroyer.

Although most of the UNSC's arsenal was classified as DEW, they were technically DEW/Micro-projectile weapons. Hard Light/Pulse laser/Ion hybrids. Thus, a kinetic barrier would stop the Ion lance, but allow the DEW elements to pass through and damage the hull.

The air filled with a deafening roar as all the guns opened up, but the sheer size of the Destroyer allowed itself to shrug off the attack. Drops of molten metal were strewn across the asphalt road, tanks darted back and forth, the crimson tongue burned everything it touched.

"The Destroyer has to drop its shields when it fires!" Arca yelled over the COM. "Hit its main gun when it charges up!"

Wisps of red collected at its mouth and condensed. It managed to fire for a split second, before the mouth exploded in a brilliant ball of red and blue. The creature screeched something incoherent and attempted to crush the attackers with its legs.

When the Destroyer had opened fire, all the Badgers concentrated their plasma missiles at the main gun. Whatever energy had collected there was immediately discharged throughout the Reaper, damaging it severely.

"Turn around, let's get out of here!" Arca flicked on the COM and contacted the convoy. "Kilo two, what's your status?"

The platoon of vehicles roared, kicking dirt and rocks from underneath their wheels "We're moving through the suburbs, ETA five minutes." The young Sergeant answered, gunfire roared over the link. "Have you dealt with the destroyer One-five Actual?"

"We've crippled it, moving to a safe location, meet you at the RV." Switching off the COM, Arca turned around and watched the Destroyer retreat. With its main guns eliminated, there wasn't much more it could do.

The COM crackled on back again, this time it was Fhajad. "Arca, latest ship readings say that the core is now critical, you've got five minutes to get out of the kill zone."

"That Destroyer's still on our ass!" Lotus yelled.

"We'll move towards the hill â€" look out!" Arca barked.

A crimson beam shot out and engulfed a Badger, the MAV flipped end over end, its hull smouldering. No one could've survived that.

"Dammit, we've got another one down!" Greystone yelled, "That Destroyer's got its main guns working again."

The remnants of the column shot off the road and bored through parklands and homes, with the Reaper close on their heels. Plumes of smoke and chunks of rubble filled the air as the massive alien crushed everything under its legs.

"Two minutes until detonation!" Arca gritted.

Swinging around a hill, the convoy found a tunnel entrance.

"We've got to go through," said Greystone, "we stay up here we die."

Arca nodded, "all units, move down into the tunnel, stay close and watch your sectors."

Flood lights illuminated the tunnel, revealing a mass of abandoned vehicles with their windows shattered.

Greystone weaved the Warthog in and out of _traffic_ while the armoured vehicles just rolled over the cars, or blasted straight through them.

A loud roar filled the air, it seemed that the Reaper was at the tunnel entrance, but could not get through.

"That'll buy us sometime," said Lotus, "but we're going to get

ambushed."

Arca kept any eye on the timer; he silently prayed and hoped that his charge was not in the kill zone.

"One minute," Arca muttered.

A deathly silence crept upon the group, speeding down the tunnel.

"Five, four, three, two, one, mark."

A low rumbling, crackling sound tore through the city, followed by the inevitable shockwave and firestorm. Buildings shattered and fell, Reapers crumbled, trees flattened.

The tunnel rocked, the supports screeched, the entrance collapsed. Then everything became silent.

Arca who was looking up at the time, shifted his gaze back to the stretching pathway in front of him. He felt greatly unease at the number of civilians killed by the nukes. _The Reapers would've gotten to them anyway_, he tried to reason.

The convoy reduced their speed to a safer level, continuing on their way.

****XXxxXX****

****SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, APPROACHING JON GRISSOM
ACADEMY****

Shepard, wearing full body armour, stood in the cockpit, watching the space station increasingly filled her vision.

"There's the folks that answered the distress call," Joker said, "Cerberus cruiser, at least a dozen fighters on blockade duty, too many for us in a straight up fight. They must want this place, bad."

"Receiving incoming transmission," said EDI.

"Let's hear it," Jane said, folding her arms.

The COM console pinged softly; Joker's fingers danced across the display and opened the channel.

"SSV _Normandy,_ " said a woman, "this is Kahlee Sanders, director of Grissom Academy. We need immediate assistance. Cerberus is attacking the facility, they're after my students."

"This is Commander Shepard," Jane replied, leaning on Joker's head rest. "We're blocked on a direct approach."

"I know," Sanders sighed, "they've taken control of our docking bays."

"Any alternatives?"

"There's an auxiliary cargo port I can probably open."

Shepard paused for a moment, "all right, we'll come in by shuttle and get you're students out of there."

The link was promptly terminated; Jane gave Joker a very delicate and soft patch on his shoulder. "Can you give us a diversion?"

"Oh boy, can I," Joker grinned, his face lighted up as he prepared the _Normandy_.

â€

The shuttle whispered out of the _Normandy_'s bay, with its contingent of elite soldiers. Everyone watched as Joker banked the stealth frigate wildly to starboard. Moreau threw the ship into a dive, cutting straight past the Cerberus cruiser and the fighter patrol.

Cerberus fighters broke off from the blockade and engaged the spiralling _Normandy_. They moved in close and engage the frigate with their main guns. But the ship's engines flared, and in an instant, the fighters were turned to vapour. The heat from the exhaust was far more than enough to reduce the tailing vessels, to slag.

With their approach clear, Cortez guided the Kodiak towards the auxiliary cargo port.

"Keep the shuttle in position, we'll be back," Shepard said.

Steve nodded, "Good luck, ma'am."

A low hiss and a soft ping signified that the port had sealed itself against the shuttle's hull. Cycling through the station's airlocks, the team gained access to the academy.

"Fan out," John whispered.

The Sabre clicked as it extended and primed itself for use. The Supersoldier moved up as point guard, while Keyes covered the left. Liara and Jane moved to the centre of the formation, with Vega and Garrus covering the right and back, respectively.

"Let's do this people," Shepard said.

Moving through the battered white hallways, muffled gunfire resounded throughout the station as Alliance and Cerberus combatants clashed.

"Better move or everyone will be gone, or dead," said Vega.

Spotting a team of Cerberus soldiers shooting at an Alliance officer, John opened fire. Advancing slowly, his shields flared as it took the brunt of counter-fire. Cobalt lances bore through the light cover, eliminating the opponents swiftly.

"These things pack a punch," Garrus whistled, if turians could whistle correctly that is â€" admiring the MA9K, or colloquially dubbed as the "Manik" by UNSC servicemen.

"Quick question, why does Shepard get a Sabre and we get the Manik?" Vega asked, "Don't get me wrong, the Manick is a fine weapon."

"It's because I'm special," said the Commander.

"Maniks and the Sabre-L have the same damage output per shot," Keyes interjected, "but Sabres have lower recoil, faster rate of fire, making them the more expensive ones to produce."

The group moved up to a partially opened door, and covered the hallway.

"Sanders, we're clear," Shepard called out, "it's me."

The doors parted open, allowing the team to enter the security room. John quickly spotted an Alliance officer, wielding a shotgun. She had a very striking appearance with her ice blue eyes, lightly tanned skin, and neatly tucked blonde hair. Her skin was devoid of wrinkles, but her face lacked the suppleness of youth. John would have to ballpark her age somewhere between forties to fifties.

"Command Shepard, thank you," Sanders said, throwing a quick glance at the Spartans, "Admiral Anderson always said that you were the best. And with Cerberus coming for my students, I need the best."

"How many of you are there?"

"Fewer than twenty," Sanders answered, moving towards a desk, "most were sent home when word of the Reaper invasion spread. But a few volunteered to stay. Some are prototyping tech for the Alliance. Others are biotics; they've been training for military operations, working together as biotic artillery."

"You said something about Admiral Anderson."

"Yes," Kahlee pondered, recalling a long but well-versed memory. "We met, twenty years ago when he was a Spectre candidate. I was there when Saren betrayed him. David saved my life that day, he's a good man."

The Spartans instantly picked up on the level of familiarity displayed by the Academy's Director.

"He was on Earth when it got hit," Jane said with regret, "he stayed behind while I got off world."

"I hadn't heard," Kahlee breathed, sounding worried, "is he alive?"

"Alive and fighting. He's currently leading the resistant movement."

Kahlee smiled in relief. "Good, if we get out of here, well, just tell him to stay alive."

"A few months of knocking over practice dummies can't get your students prepared for war."

"Agreed, but the Alliance needs every resources it can get. And our

students are unique resources. They wanted to help, and how could we say no with the entire galaxy falling apart?"

The console began to hiss with static, "Hang on, I've been trying to get communications working."

"We've still got students trapped in Orion hall," said an instructor over the COM, "Cerberus has us boxed in, requesting immediate assistance."

"Damnit!"

"Orion hall?" Jane queried.

"Back down the hallway, I can get the door open for you."

"Okay, I'll bring them back here, and we'll make a run for the shuttle."

"Thank you Commander and good luck. I'll stay put and see if I can recover some of the systems."

The team filed back into the passage way and swept through the facility, covering corners and sweeping light resistance aside. It became prudent for the group to knock out any shield generators to deprive the Cerberus assault team of any defensive capabilities, making them easier targets.

One datapad Keyes picked up from the ground, contained very disturbing information. He quickly gathered that the students here would be taken away and forcefully drafted into Cerberus through indoctrination.

Shepard also managed to read the datapad to, which served to drive her to stop the students from being turned into mindless machines or slaves.

Screams of struggling students filled the air as they tried to resist their Cerberus captors, but everyone knew they couldn't get to them in time. War is no fairy tale, truth and innocence are always the first casualties.

Jane winced inwardly as she saw a boy, no older than seventeen, dragged away. Unable to let another person fall to harm under her keep, she summoned all her biotic strength, and shattered the bullet proof glass.

The Spartans moved in close behind Shepard, and blanketed the team of Cerberus troops in a hail of fire, filling the air with the stench of ozone and cooked flesh.

Leaping over the barricade, Jane tended to the boy.

"What's your name?" she asked kindly.

"Tim Lionfield," he winced, "the bastards broke my leg, and decided to drag me by it."

Some of the team members welled with rage, realising the inhumanity of Cerberus soldiers. Even Keyes believed that was too excessive by

ONI standards.

"I'll carry him with us," Vega offered.

"Couldn't we send him with Sanders?" Liara asked.

"It might slow her down," said Shepard, "besides, when we link up with the other students; he'll be safe with them."

Moving into another room, the team aided another biotic student and his sibling, directing them to stay close to Garrus.

"Hate the bloody COM," muttered Keyes. The continuous droning of a Cerberus announcer bugged him slightly.

"Commander," it was Sanders, "you better hurry, one of our instructors are with the students, she's telling me they're under heavy attack."

Minutes later, they arrived at Orion hall, where a massive clash was taking place. Biotic powers filled the air, hurling Cerberus troops towards the furthest corner.

Shepard noticed the extremely powerful biotic, tearing through the ranks of the assaulting force. She was dressed in studded leather clothing, and had grown out her hair.

"Jack?" Jane called, realising it was her former crewmate.

"Shepard?" Jack answered with joy.

Sensors on the Chief's MJOLNIR began to ping as it detected a large entity. He gestured to Keyes and took up firing positions. The two Spartans shouldered their M7 Lasers.

"I do believe that this is overkill," Essingdon commented.

Jack, having sensed the danger too, yelled at her students to get to safety.

"Everyone, back off! This thing is way out of your league."

When the Atlas walker finally came into view, two lances of cobalt energy erupted from the shouldered weapons, and burned straight through the armour. The mechanised unit shuddered and spasmed as its electronics shorted out, before billowing into a fireball.

"Target down," John said, slinging the anti-vehicle weapon onto his back.

Shepard gestured the rest of her team to cover the corners, while she addressed Jack.

"Well, Kahlee said she was putting out an SOS," Jacked chuckled, from the balcony. "I had no idea the Queen of the Girl Scouts and Lord of the Knights would show up."

The former convict then turned around to face her students, and issued a few orders. Leaping off the balcony, Jack used her biotics to

slowly guide herself down.

"Good to see you Shepard."

John half expected Jack to slap Shepard, knowing how strongly she felt about Cerberus, but she didn't. And that came as quite a surprise.

"You look good Jack."

"Thanks," the Alliance instructor then turned to Garrus, "hey catman, you still look like shit."

Garrus chuckled, "still charming as ever Jack."

"Looks like you brought a friend, Chief," Jack said, noticing another towering presence.

"Looks like you've got yourself a family."

Jack smiled, "yeah, I guess you could say that. The Brass knew I was working with you guys, and so they offered me this. And apparently these kids reacted well to my teaching style."

"The Psychotic biotic," Prangley chuckled.

"I will destroy you!" Rodriguez yelled.

"Drink your juice Rodriguez," Jack nagged in a motherly tone, "you couldn't destroy wet tissue paper if you tried."

"These kids are lucky to have you looking out for them," Shepard said.

"Yeah well, some of your personality has rubbed off on me," Jack took another glance back at her students, "anyone who screws with my kids, I will tear them a new asshole, and then shove their heads up it." She said darkly.

"Well, that's graphic," Garrus cringed.

"Don't worry Garrus, you've already been through that, after tearing that stick out of your ass."

Vakarian shook his head, "I just can't win, can I?"

Jack chuckled, "against me? Never."

"At least I can get a girl."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Heads up Commander," Cortez's voice crackled over the COM, "Cerberus cruiser is returning."

"Get out of here and back to the Normandy, we'll find another off the station," Shepard ordered.

"Roger that, and good luck ma'am."

Jane switched the COM channels and contacted Kahlee, "Shepard to Sanders, the students are safe but the shuttles a no go."

"Understood, I might know another way off the station, but I need station wide access."

"Got it, tell me what I need to do."

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****UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE**_**, IN ORBIT OF INSTALLATION 07****

Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky, Head of ONI, and one of the most feared women in human history. At her finger tips, she held the power to cause massive internal conflict or avert it.

Within the secure confines of the stealth carrier UNSC _Night Horse_, the Admiral was surrounded by a large circular desk and panels of monitors_. _If anyone wanted outside of her staff wanted to see her, they would have to navigate through a two kilometre maze of security checkpoints.

She flipped through the pile of reports, all printed in _paper_, updating herself on operation progress. Operation PROMETHEUS and ONISAD Operation reports dominated her field of focus.

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**Office of Naval Intelligence**

**Special Activities Division**

**Classified; Eyes only**

The Office of Naval Intelligence Special Activities Division specialises in all aspects of unconventional warfare, pertaining to politics and economics. Applicants are recruited from University Graduates, and undergo a series of psychological analysis. If the recruit passes examination, they will begin training. Training staff aim for a zero per cent washout rate due to the rarity of suitable applicants.

Applicants must have a Bachelor Degree or higher in the follow fields (specifications are subjected to change):

Law

Science, Chemistry; Physics; Biology

Engineering

Political Science

_Political
Geography_

Medicine

Technology

Psychology

Economics

Fields Operatives will then be selected from ONISAD Operatives/Agents. Field Operatives must have the following attributes:

Mental compartmentalisation

Observant/Analytical

Emotionally uncompromised

Decisive

Preferable if applicants are distant from family.

Applicants will then undergo SPARTAN IV Augmentations, psychological conditioning and synergy analysis to determine best team combinations.

**Note:** Operatives tend to hold themselves in a professional manner when around personnel outside of ONI, but act freely when amongst themselves. This is most likely due to them coping with traumatic stress._

Once deployed, it is recommended that teams remain aware of each other's Operational Theatre to prevent units from being compromised.

**Operations:**

Numerous political and economic manipulation.

Joint Operations with NavSpecWar Teams

There are currently 36 ONISAD Operatives on rotation.

**Deployment roster:**

First Element; Operation ONAGER II

Second Element (II); Operation REDCLOVER

Third Element (II); Operation HOMECOMING

Fourth Element; Operation REDCLOVER

Fifth Element; Operation HOMECOMING

Sixth Element; Operation PROMETHEUS

**Casualties so far:** 12_

**Operatives flagged:**

_Second Element (I), Fifth Element â€" Operative Anthony "Arca" Zhuge;

>Led numerous operations successfully. However, stress levels may be extremely high, but unable to determine with 100% accuracy, Arca is extremely capable at mental compartmentalisation.
He has also stated during check-ups that he experiences recurring dreams about Operation-IP/SD- R0234, and suffers from sensitivity of bright lights and headaches from time to time. Recommend that he be put on leave to recover._

_Fifth Element â€" Operative Bright "Lotus" Zhou

>Currently in a relationship with a relative of Operative Brian "Greystone" Manh, chance of leak minimal, considering Commander Julia Manh is the CO of the UNSC Destroyer Swift Winds.

_Third Element â€" Operative Frank "Bishop" Ryans

>States that he experiences severe headaches and sensitivity of bright lights. Crying babies seem to disturb him greatly.
Recommend he be rotated through to recover._

_Ninth Element (I), Ninth Element (II) â€" Operative Sam "Archer" Fletcher

>Suffers from light to moderate headaches and blurry vision when off duty, Combat effectiveness is still 100%.
Recommend Archer's leave be extended._

â€|

Since Operation PROMETHEUS was the most sensitive Op to date, Parangosky had to order the Agents of Sixth Element to censor most information.

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**Office of Naval Intelligence**

**Special Activities Division**

**Classified; Eyes only**

**Operation PROMETHEUS**

**Report by Sixth Element**

** Operatives have been weary of our presence. Soldiers working in conjecture with us lack individualism; we always have to refer to their superiors.

Request that you talk to ** about this

We have received the next batch of **. It's being put to good use. Additional ** have been built and a company of soldiers have been fielded.

Noticed the infinite supply of recruits â€" Request an inquiry on Joint force's source.

Joint group casualties have been high, but acceptable by ** standards.

Some ** are incompatible with our biology. However, ** are making optimal usage with new batch of Spec Ops.

They seem obsessive with melee weapons.

** may have found an indirect solution to the Flood Threat. We will not alert ** of the magnitude of the find.

Flagged numerous operations in regards to what ** authorised. We regard them as irrational and waste of resources.

Request that you reprimand **, if not then terminate.

We estimate that there is a high chance of Operation HOMECOMING may interfere with current operations. Should Fifth Element and Third Element be alerted to Operation PROMETHEUS?

â€|

Parangosky pondered about Sixth Element's last inquiry, Operation HOMECOMING was dangerously close to Operation PROMETHEUS, and compromising it. But she decided that it was best to keep PROMETHEUS under wraps for the time being.

The Admiral knew that if another team realised the true nature of PROMETHEUS, they would definitely report it to ONI Section 0, which was under the command of Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood.

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****JON GRISSOM ACADEMY****

From what Jane had seen so far, Jack had trained these students well. Their combined biotic attack was extremely effective. Cerberus forces stood little chance against the mighty force of combined arms. Dozens of dead soldier's littered the docking room next to the shuttle bay, some were riddled with rounds, others were just blood smears.

"Sampson and Norton, carry Lionfield to the shuttle, we'll cover you!" Jack ordered.

Without a word, the two students carried their wounded friend through the security doors and behind the safety of a shuttle.

From the seat of her commandeered Atlas walker, Shepard had laid down an overwhelming volume of fire, keeping the Cerberus troops at bay. The guns on the machine had a nasty tendency of turning people into a thick red mist. She probably would've killed fifteen men in the last five minutes alone

"Shepard, everyone's aboard, let's go!" Jack yelled.

The Spectre quickly dismounted the vehicle and tossed a primed frag into the cockpit. A few seconds later, the Atlas exploded, showering the group in shrapnel.

Garrus remained perched in his crow's nest, picking off Cerberus soldiers with his sniper file, while Keyes and John fell back slowly;

making sure no one was left behind.

"Shift you're fire right," John ordered.

Keyes swung his Sabre-H to the right and unleashed a torrent of accurate firing, burning enemy soldiers in half.

"Get to the shuttle Garrus, we'll cover you," the Chief said.

The two soldiers slowly backed to the shuttle, picking off any Cerberus trooper that dared rear their head.

Once everyone was accounted for, the shuttle lifted off from the bay, and departed for the Normandy.

"Joker," said Shepard, hailing her ship, "watch your fire, we're coming in on a Cerberus shuttle."

"Copy that Commander, I've got you on the sensors."

"Thank you Commander," Sanders said gratefully, "we would've never gotten of that station if you hadn't come."

"Fâ€| forget that," Jack gasped, feeling a bit fatigued from prolonged biotic usage, "we kicked some ass. Next place we dock, you're all getting inked, my treat. What do you guys want? Ascension Project logo? Glowing fist? Maybe a unicorn for Rodriguez?"

"Screw you ma'am," Rodriguez said playfully.

"I'll take the unicorn," said Lionfield.

"Seriously?" Jack asked, "I'd thought you'd get a Lion, in a field."

"Hahaha, very funny ma'am. I'd actually like to keep my skin, ink free."

"Hey Jack since you're Alliance now," said Joker, "are you going to a uniform, or are you just going to get the bars tattooed on?"

"Screw you! Fâ€| Flight Lieutenant," Jack muttered.

"What the hell was that?" Joker laughed.

Kahlee smiled, "Jack agreed to watch her language in order to maintain the level of professionalism require by our teachers."

"What, does that mean she has a swear jar or something? Because if we empty that, I bet we'd have enough money to buy another cruiser."

"Cover your ears kids," Jack smirked, "hey Joker, f-fillet minion is what you're going to be if you don't shut up."

"Ah, cows, my one weakness! I just can't eat more than five of them at lunch!"

Kahlee turned away from the banter, and decided to talk to the two

Spartans. She marvelled at their size, and saw the grace of their combat prowess. Sanders's hearing even managed to pick up a couple of students already talking about the fearsome armoured soldiers.

"I apologise if my information is out of date, but you don't look like Alliance."

"We're not," answered John.

"We're United Nations Space Command Special Forces," Keyes finished.

"United Nations Space Command?" Khalee asked.

"It's a long story."

Shepard sat down, next to David Archer, watching the kids and Jack banter playfully.

"Thank you Commander Shepard, for making things quiet."

"You're welcome, David."

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"_The V24 Sparrow VTOL is a small low atmospheric vehicle designed to be used for quick infiltration and exfiltration by fireteams."_

Air Chief Marshal Andrew Hoskins

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Tis doneâ€¦| it's taken awhile to get here, but it's all coming together very soon.****

20. Where the Legacy Began

****A/N: Congrats Nanashil13, you're the 300****th**** reviewer.****

"_The M787D SAW LMG, admire it, love it, take care of it. This thing of beauty spews out one-thousand rounds per minute. Anything down range will be turned to ash."_

Drill Sergeant Eli York

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****UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE**_**, IN ORBIT OF ARTIFICIAL PLANET, ELYSIUM GARDENS****

Parangosky opened the email from her encrypted computer and began to scroll the reports. Most of them were about current operations against Insurrectionists, but one was from Sixth Element. And that was what she was after. In the Admiral's mind, she believed that the fate of humanity rested on Operation PROMETHEUS.

â€¦|

**Office of Naval Intelligence**

**Special Activities Division**

**Classified; Eyes only**

**Operation PROMETHEUS**

**Report by Sixth Element**

URGENT!

We have compelling evidence and reports that suggests Commander John-117 is still alive, mobile and armed. LTCOL Dr Essingdon Keyes is with him. There is a high chance that Operation PROMETHEUS may be compromised.

Strongly recommend that Fifth Element, Third Element, Commander 117 and Keyes be notified of Operation PROMETHEUS.

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THE ARK, UNSC HIGHCOM

Hood sat his oak desk and glossed over the daily reports. A little over two weeks had passed since the first recon elements departed Coalition held space, and now the Fleets were being mobilised for the next phase of Operation HOMECOMING. A large number of UNSC Prowlers had returned with nothing, most planets either remained unable to support life, or just desolate. However, most reports mentioned stations that were on the fringes of solar systems. Each station seemed to have a glowing blue core, and two struts jutting out, mimicking a sling of some kind.

"Cortana, what's the ETA of the Prowlers?" the Admiral asked.

The AI's avatar materialised on a nearby holotank pedestal. "Provided that all ships followed stealth protocols, _Red Rising_ should have just reached New Hampshire. _Elysium Sun_ would've arrived nine days and three hours ago. _Sheathed_ will be reaching Darius in two days and seven hours."

"Thank you, Cortana. I want you to head over to Port Benning, the Destroyer _Divinus_. I have allowed Commander Miranda Keyes command of that ship. I think you being the AI will help her ease back into things."

"Yes sir, but who will take my place?"

"I have that covered."

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UNSC **_DIVINUS, **_**IN ORBIT OF THE ARK**

Miranda leaned back into the comfortable arm chair, watching as her crew went about their daily duties. It felt good to be back in the loop of things again, better yet, _Swift Winds_, commanded by Julia Manh will be accompany the _Divinus_ on a routine patrol.

"Good to have you with us, Miranda," Julia greeted warmly over the private channel.

"Glad to be back," Keyes smiled.

"What do you think of your new ship?"

"Third times the charm," said Miranda, "I get to have a destroyer now. More firepower and armour, but less manoeuvrability. Love the design too, more pretty to look at."

"'Pretty' is just a side effect, Miranda," said Julia, "it's just a coincidence that this pretty design worked well with desired combat statistics."

"Rightâ€¦ you sure it wasn't the Engineers wanting their creation to be less of an eyesore?" Miranda asked, referring to the 26th Century ships, "I swear they got interior designers in to work on the ship."

"What makes you say that?"

"Ambient lights and marble chess boards in the Rec rooms. Leather couches and recliners in the mini-theatres. And my cabin looks like a master bedroom of a presidential suite in a five-star hotel," Keyes listed.

"Huh, my ship doesn't have a chess board, I should put in a requisition for that," Julia pondered.

Miranda chuckled, "come on; let's get this show on the road."

"ClickÃ© line," Manh commented.

"What can I say, I'm old fashioned."

"Sweetie," Julia said in a motherly tone, "when you've been awake as long as I have, then you can say you're old fashioned."

"She's right you know," Cortana added.

"Ha, ha Cortana, be a dear and do start up _Divinus_."

"Wow, time off has really ruined your professionalism," Manh stated.

Miranda shook her head as the destroyer's engines rumbled. The exhausts flared a calm blue, pushing the ship into

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****EARTH, CANADA, OUTSKIRTS OF VANCOUVER****

Sunlight, Arca sighed in relief as the convoy left the death trap that is the tunnel.

"Incoming!" an Alliance soldier yelled.

The Mako shuddered and screeched as an anti-tank round slammed into it. Molten copper seethed through the gap in the armour and cooked the occupants alive. Chunks of smouldering alloys rained down on the convoy as the vehicle was torn asunder.

"Ambush!" Lotus yelled, rising up from the cabin to man the gun.

"No, stay down!" Arca warned.

The Operatives grunted in pain as a shockwave tore through the windows, flipping the Hog and hurling it across the tunnel exit. The Supersoldiers felt the impact surge through them, rendering their world in darkness.

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****EDEN PRIME (UNSC OUTER COLONY: ERIDANUS II)****

Cortez guided the Osprey in, with grace over the once idyllic planet. He admired how the bird handled and felt it dance to his commands.

"Eridanus-Two," whispered Keyes, "glassed in twenty-five-thirty. And look at it now."

"What's wrong?" John asked.

"There never was any reclamation project initiatedâ€¦"

"You said you grew up here, didn't you Chief?" Shepard asked, she only seemed to address the Spartan by his first name in private.

"Yes, Eridanus-Two, I remember some of it vaguely. Before my family moved off world," it was a partial lie, and Keyes knew it too, given his level of security clearance. The Chief wasn't too keen on revealing his private life before the SPARTAN Program. John recalled his first mission here, his first real deployment. This was where it all began.

"Eden Prime, this is where it all began," Liara breathed, gazing upon the peaceful planet. "Where the Prothean beacon that gave you the vision that warned us about the Reapers."

"And where Saren launched his first major attack with the geth," Garrus added.

"Yes," the Asari agreed, "and now with Cerberus here, Eden Prime's colonists are under attack again."

"Seems more like just than three years ago," Shepard reminisced, the long days of battle were starting to take a toll on her. She felt weary, just like the Spartan standing next to her."

"I remember the reports," Garrus said, "I was busting my ass, trying to find something on Saren. Hearing that he attacked a colony while I was mired in bureaucracy, it was a bad day."

"Cerberus hit Eden Prime hard, whatever they found here was worth a major offensive," said Liara, clearly angered.

"A pincer blitzkrieg tactic," Keyes said, observing the satellite images that allowed the analyst to conclude the strategies employed.

"Blitzkrieg?" asked Vega.

"World War Two tactic employed by the Germans, rapid armoured and mechanised advanced, supported by artillery and close air ground support," said John.

"World War Two?"

"A global conflict that began in nineteen-thirty-nine and ended in nineteen-forty-five."

"There are survivors elsewhere on the colony," said Liara, softly, "but they killed everyone near the dig site. The Alliance did whatever they could to evacuate the colonists, but Cerberus came in so quicklyâ€¦"

"If we find survivors, we'll do what we can," Shepard said reassuringly, "what about this artefact? Any idea if it can help with the Crucible?"

"The Alliance didn't get any specifics on what Cerberus had uncovered," said Liara, "I know it would help to have another source of information on the Catalyst, butâ€¦ we can't count on that."

"I'm bringing you in as close to the dig site as I can," said Cortez, "no way we'll avoid detection but it should get you a few minutes."

"Understood," said Jane, "alright everyone, get ready to move."

The Chief shouldered his Sabre, watching the weapon detach from its folded state and formed itself with a satisfying click. His HUD began to ping; someone was sending the Osprey a transmission over encrypted channels, which was being forwarded to him.

"Sierra One-one-seven, here," the Spartan said, he had decided to leave his external speakers on, prompting the cadre to look at him.

"Sierra One-one-seven, good to hear from you, sir," said an elated voice, "I am Lieutenant Jason Stanforth, commanding officer of the UNSC _Elysium Sun_."

"Another Reclaimer?" 256 inquired happily, "splendid!"

A Lieutenant? Given the sensitive nature of Operation HOMECOMING, it was quite strange to have a junior officer leading a unit, but it also meant that Stanforth had to be extremely talented.

"Sitrep Lieutenant," said the Chief.

"We arrived nine days ago and monitored planetary activities. We attempted to establish contact with the settlement as per protocol,

but next thing we knew, Eridanus-Two was under attack. Protocol dictated that we do not interfere, so we waited out. With you being the highest-ranking officer here, we follow your command now, sir. All your orders override current standings orders."

"I'll get back to you, Lieutenant." The Spartan muted the COM and turned to face Shepard.

"We could use their help in getting the artefact," she said, "then we can head to Coalition space to get help."

The Chief nodded, and contacted _Elysium Sun_, "Lieutenant, what's your on-board contingent?"

"Sixteen Helljumpers."

John frowned, only sixteen ODSTs? Well, they served as the security detail, but usually whenever a Prowler is aimed to be taken, sixteen ODSTs are never enough to repel the boarding parties.

"Send those men to these coordinates," the Spartan order, sending a NavMarker.

"Copy sir," said Stanforth, "and Chief, mind telling us what's going on?"

"Long story Lieutenant," the Supersoldier answered. "When this is over, I'll send you the reports."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we've got our reinforcements," said Jane, somewhat eager to see UNSC personnel in action, "let's get to it."

"With luck, we can get to the dig site before they know we're here," said Liara.

Keyes looked at John and sent him a private COM message.

"Lady Luck's always on your side."

"And that's why well get to the dig site before Ceberus knows we're here," the Spartan quipped.

The Chief and Keyes unslung their Sabres which they had modified to have a higher-rate of fire, larger cooling systems and an extended power cell, all at the cost of mobility. In effect, the Sabres had been turned into light to medium machine guns.

John knew he was going to need a lot of firepower on this mission. Orbital scans had shown a massive number of Cerberus troops amassing around the dig site, and fighting through, would be hell.

Cortez hovered the Osprey above a mesa covered in green foliage. The side doors opened, allowing to the team to jump down. Landing with a resounding thud, the two Spartans left a noticeable crater in the ground. Apparently they hadn't bothered to use the thrusters to even themselves out. With a low whine, the dropship pulled back to the _Normandy_.

"What did you have for breakfast this morning?" Liara asked Keyes, glancing at the cracks in the rock.

Vega, Jane and Garrus chuckled.

"A lot," the Scientist replied with mock sincerity.

Turning their gaze skyward, the team saw two UNSC Greyhawks drop their active-camo and descended onto the ground. The smaller, sleeker crafts' doors opened, allowing sixteen ODSTs to quickly secure the perimeter.

To Jane and her original cadre, the ODSTs looked fearsome and magnificent. The black and grey livery armour coupled with the silver visor merged the soldiers perfectly into the urban surroundings. She noticed the general body language displayed in each of the soldiers, all of them were surprised to see the Chief again.

Keyes had already tapped into the TEAMCOM, and was listening to the conversations of the Helljumpers.

"Never thought I'd meet the Chief," one said.

"You owe me six credits, told you he was still alive."

"Well at least the aliens aren't bad looking this time," another said.

Keyes was sure that Liara would've blushed if she heard what the Helljumpers were saying.

From the Chief's standpoint, it had appeared that the animosity displayed by these brutal soldiers, towards the Spartans had dispelled for the most part.

"Commander One-one-seven?" the leader of the outfit asked, his armour had an officer insignia on the chest plate. "I'm First Lieutenant James 'Rook' Daniels. We're ready on your go."

John nodded in acknowledgement, "Move into the settlement, and secure it."

"Rules of engagement sir?"

"Shoot on site, all civilians in this sector are dead."

"Copy that sir."

UNSC Military Doctrine focused on modularity, flexibility, independence and self-initiative, which overall, made rapid precision strikes far more effective. Shock and awe, through precision. The accompanying ODST unit were no different. The entire unit was outfitted with the M787D SAW LMG, M7 Grindell/Galilean Laser, Achilles Packs, Ember and Sabre-L rifles.

Already, the Helljumpers had moved into a loose covering formation, constantly sweeping the area for any hostile threats.

"Let's move Rook," the Spartan said.

The Lieutenant nodded, and gestured a few orders to his men. Jane was impressed by the way the ODS'Ts moved. They stayed close to cover, and practically sprinted from point to point.

"I've got two hostiles up on the walkway, sir," said a Sergeant.

"Take them out quietly," Rook ordered.

Green acknowledgement lights winked on. Two ODS'Ts carefully approached the Cerberus soldiers, whilst being covered by their team. In swift movements, matte-black combat knives were shoved into the troopers' jugular. The enemy soldiers flailed in the vice-like grips of the Helljumper's, their life, slowly fading away. The bodies went limp, and were quickly dragged out of sight.

"They've got style," James commented, out of admiration.

"Move up," John whispered over the COM.

ODS'Ts moved into the housing area with great precision, nothing left uncovered. Upon entering a house, John found it ironic that for a garden world with such a reputation, the houses would have such a utilitarian look. He expected something with a bit more flair or serenity.

Keyes was also thinking the same thing. With the Coalition's standard of living, skyrocketing, the design industry was flourishing. So it also came as a surprise to see such houses lacking in artistic nature.

Shepard glided over to a desk, and picked up a datapad. The contents of it made her skin crawl. Cerberus was lulling the populace into working at the research camp, with high food rations and false hopes.

Noticing her discomfort, John walked over to her while the ODS'Ts secured the room.

"What's wrong, Shepard?"

"Take a look at this," she whispered dryly. "They're tearing families apart."

The Spartan read the article, and felt a small discomfort in the pit of his stomach. Even the Insurrectionists didn't resort to tactics of similar calibre.

"They're hampering us. Not stepping aside, or helping us. But hindering us," Liara said in disgust. "The good thing from this is, I can get this intel to the resistance on Eden Prime, help any remaining survivors."

Rook looked at the Spartans, slightly confused. "What's she saying? It sounds beautiful and all, but I don't understand."

"Oh, forgot about that," said Keyes, he promptly held out his holographic tacpad and uploaded the translation software into the ODS'Ts' neural interface.

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****CERBERUS HEADQUARTERS, ILLUSIVE MAN'S OFFICE****

The anonymous holographic of Gaia appeared on the projector. It was hard to tell what she was feeling or thinking, maybe that was the point. She was like water, absolutely transparent and bare for all the world to see, and yet, like the currents, her motives are unknown.

"Harper, what do you have for me?"

"Gaia, I'd like you to meet Kai Leng," the Illusive Man began, "he's the best of the best, and absolutely loyal to our cause."

Kai Leng, Cerberus's top assassin and wetwork operative, appeared from the shadows. His body was heavily augmented with cybernetics, there was nothing remotely human about him, save for his misguided beliefs and his past.

"That's it?" Gaia said harshly, "Harper, it's going to take more than this ninja dressed in tights and a black coat, to control the Reapers. Where's the research results?"

"You've got your army," Jack responded with a small tone of annoyance, "and our research has given us much fruit, but we're not there yet."

"I've read the reports, Harper," Gaia hissed, "about how you're conducting the research. You're going too far. The cost for the results is very high. At this rate, you'll cost us the war and our existence before we achieve control."

"You put me in charge of Cerberus," said the Illusive Man, "you chose me, because of how far I was willing to go."

"When you wipe out thirty colonies and lure refugees into false sanctuaries, I expect to see a novel of results and our goals accomplished," Gaia said, stating her point, "but when you've killed millions of people and I only get a basket of fruit, there is something wrong. You're sacrificing humanity itself, for its own existence. You'll end up costing us everything!"

"I've gotten us a loyal army â€" like you wanted â€" an elite force, and results," Harper justified.

"At what cost?" Gaia hissed, "Dozens of colonies are empty, Alliance forces are being hampered, and who knows how many more will die needlessly. I selected you because you were ruthless, but what you've shown me is idiocy! You've wiped out entire cells of scientists once they had finished their task. You've lost the loyalty of hundreds of talented people. Your management skills are extremely inefficient! I expected better of you Harper, not this wasteful behaviour."

The link was then promptly cut from Gaia's end. From what Leng could tell, she was pissed. He always thought that she was cold and calculative like the Illusive Man. But from what just occurred, her style of calculation was different, and truth be told, more correct. Everything the Illusive Man did seem too excessive and heavy handed. Nonetheless, he was actually doing something about the Reaper

threat.

"Leng, go train the men," the Illusive Man said, "I want everyone to be at their best."

"Yes sir."

****XXxxxXX****

****EDEN PRIME (UNSC OUTER COLONY: ERIDANUS II)****

"Look at that, Prothean artefacts sticking out from the ground." Jane whispered as a beautiful vista appeared in front of her, but marred by the massive excavation project. The sun shone through the grey clouds, casting a grim but hopeful light on the once peaceful colony.

"The what?" asked Rook.

"Protheans," Keyes explained, "their equivalent of the Forerunners."

256 floated a little higher from the formation, and scanned the scenery. "Remarkable," he beamed, "just as my Makers predicted."

"Predicted what?" Liara asked.

"The evolution of Prothean civilisation," the Monitor said, "however, we have not accounted for the interference of the Reapers. Nonetheless, remarkable how their technology still remained functional, after all this time."

Six began to float around the area, scanning and collecting information.

"Won't he give away our position?" Vega inquired.

"Not to fear," 256 reassured, "my sensors allow me to detect all life forms in our current vicinity."

John examined the Prothean artefacts, and noticed how similar they were to Forerunner design. Colour patterns were the same, though Forerunner preferred trigonometric shapes and straight edges, whereas the Protheans developed a taste for slight curves.

"So Liara," Garrus said playful, "ever dug up-what do the humans call it â€" a dinosaur?"

"No, dinosaurs and other fossils would be planetology," the Asari said, as a matter of fact. "I'm an archaeologist, I study artefacts left by sapient species. The two fields are completely different, and-ohâ€"|"

Some of the Helljumpers were snickering inside their sound proof helmets. Keyes and Shepard were just leaning on the crates, laughing.

"You walked right into that one!" Shepard called out.

"You were joking weren't you?" Liara asked.

"A bit," Garrus replied in a brotherly tone, "but at least you're catching on these days."

The group moved onto the catwalk which extended over the dig site.

"This elevator must lead down to the dig site," said Liara, moving to the console. Her slender fingers danced across the keyboard as she entered in commands, while the ODSTs took up defensive positions.

The platform rumbled as the elevator rose, upon it; laid a pod of some kind.

"Goddess," the Asari scientist gasped, "it doesn't seem possible."

"What is it?" Shepard asked.

"It's not a Prothean artefact," Liara said, shaking her head. The elevator hissed as its locks were engaged. "It's a Prothean."

In an instant, all the UNSC personnel engaged their deep spectrum scanners.

"A Prothean?" Garrus asked, slightly cynical, "you mean a Collector or the bodies we found back on Illos?"

"Like the bodies we found back on Illos," Liara confirmed, "but this one is alive."

256 hovered over, "yes, I can confirm that the Prothean within, is still alive."

"Crack it open," Shepard said, let's see what we find.

"You remember those stasis chambers back on Illos? The only reason they failed, was a lack of power," Liara said. She activated her Omni-tool and began to scan the pod.

Keyes stood nearby, eager to meet an alien race.

"Cerberus found this in an underground bunker," T'Soni said, reading her intel. "It still has power. He's been in stasis for the past fifty-thousand years, waiting for us. Think of what we could learn?"

Liara sounded very hopeful, and that was understandable. Keyes was sure he'd be far more jumpy than her if he ever came across a Forerunner in stasis.

"What can you tell me about Prothean culture?" Shepard asked.

"Given your experiences with the cipher," said Liara, glancing at Shepard, "you probably know as much as I do. The Prothean Empire spanned across the known galaxy. They uplifted many species to join the galactic community."

"Galactic community? You mean something like a Council?" Vega asked.

"Yes exactly," Liara smiled, "their cultural and artistic expression are actually quite close to that of the Ancient Asari. And given their similar interests in helping other species, it's clear that they believed in interspecies cooperation. Finding one alive will give us a great advantage."

"They sound close to that of my Makers," said 256.

"The Forerunners?"

"Yes, they held a strong belief in the Mantle. Benevolent custodians of the galaxy."

Shepard looked at the pod.

"A live Prothean, this could be what we need to finish the Prothean device."

"I hope so, if he is the only Prothean sent into stasis," Liara seemed to be bursting with pride and joy, "he could be the foremost scientist of his time. Perhaps the wisest councillor!"

"Oh my," 256 said, worriedly.

"What's wrong lightbulb?" Vega asked.

"This pod has been damaged, life signs are erratic."

"Then let's get him out of there," Shepard urged.

"No," Liara warned, shaking her head, "opening the pod will kill him. We must find the command signal that ends the stasis mode. We also need to find a way to physically open the pod without doing more damage."

The lack of modularity shown in the pod made Keyes frown. Machines that preserve life should not be heavily networked.

"Cerberus took over the labs nearby to research what they've found at the dig site, that's likely our best bet."

"Then that's where we're going," said Shepard.

The group prepared to move away, when an ODST called out.

"Incoming bogeys!"

In just a few short moments, the skies filled with Cerberus shuttles, inbound for the pod.

"Take those Cerberus shuttles down!" John ordered.

Plumes of smoke trailed in the wake of the missiles, streaking towards the lead Cerberus shuttle. The vessel exploded in a violent firestorm, before spiralling out of control. Another craft had its doors blown off, flinging the Cerberus soldier's into the hole below. If the shockwave didn't kill them, the fall certainly will.

"I'm out!" a Helljumper indicated, his Achilles pack was spent.

"Me too!"

Scores more vessels were gutted as the DEW beams cut straight through their hold, vaporising anyone inside. The empty shells, trailed by smoke crashed into the ground, kicking up dirt.

"Find cover!" the Spartan shouted.

A couple of gunships swooped in, guns blazing. They were careful however, not to aim anywhere near the stasis pod. Heavy calibre rounds crashed all around the Spartan, boring their way into the crates, and causing his shields to flare.

The ODS'Ts moved behind the crates and took up firing positions. Cerberus soldier's leapt from their stricken vessels, using their jetpacks to manoeuvre safely onto the catwalk.

Lead squads of Cerberus troops were cut down where they landed, hypervelocity rounds slashed through their armour, spraying gore over the railings.

"SAWs, open up!" Rook yelled.

The LMG gunners rested the bipods on whatever they could, and sprayed a torrent of savage energy at the enemies. It sounded as if there were dozens of saws going off, combined with the sound of violent electrical discharge.

"We can't stick around here much longer," the Chief said.

"Right," Shepard agreed, "we need to move. James, stay here and cover our six."

"Copy Commander," Vega smiled, reloading his newly gifted Sabre-L, "hey Lightbulb, why don't you hang out with me?"

The Monitor paused for a second, before mimicking what appeared to be a shrugging gesture. Six floated within cover, and rolled into the open to pick off Cerberus soldiers.

John then turned to the ODS'T Lieutenant, "we need a rearguard."

The Lieutenant nodded.

"Delta One-two and Delta One-Three, cover our asses," Rook ordered over the COM.

Green acknowledgement lights winked on.

"The rest of you, with me."

The Helljumpers broke off and head towards the research lab, moving in a pepper-potting fashion. Although Cerberus was numerically superior, they hadn't expected their foes to be advancing, which threw them into disarray.

The Spartan-IIs modified Sabres were causing all kinds of hell for

the Cerberus troops. Seething hot energy stabbed through cover and cut its way into flesh. John could hear the soldiers scream in pain as their innards were literally cooked. Men withered and fell into the open, allowing the ODSs to make short work of them.

"The Centurion," Jane pointed at, "he's mine!"

Having fought alongside Shepard for a while now, John was well versed with her mannerisms and one-liners. The sentence she just uttered, meant, _'I'm going to squash the fucker with a crate!'_

The Helljumpers watched in pure amazement as Jane's body was enveloped in a mesmerising blue mist. She ripped a crate off from the ground, and hurled it at the massed Centurions and engineers. The massive container groaned as it was hurled into the air, and came to a screeching halt as it washed away the enemy.

"Damn," Rook muttered, "that's impressive."

Moving up, John entered what appeared to be the research lab. He found it ironic that it sported the same utilitarian look as the residential areas. The Chief always thought that homes would tend to have a warmer feel, and definitely warmer than that of a lab.

Shepard walked into the room, shaking one of her legs in an attempt to get the gore off her boot.

"Why do you always step into what's left of them?" John asked, shaking his head.

"Hey, it's not my fault that they get turned to mush."

John just looked at her. "Yes it easy."

Jane rolled her eyes, "You know it's really creepy when you just stare at me and say nothing?"

The Spartan tilted his head to one side, "just look for whatever you're looking for."

Shepard moved over towards a pulsing console, illuminated under a blue hue. Her fingers waltzed across the panel as she brought up a data entry.

Jane began to watch the screen intently when it showed the last stand of the Protheans. Her eyes glowed an olive green, as what was a recording, became a memory. She watched as a squad of Protheans fired upon an endless horde of Collectors. She marvelled the appearance of a natural Prothean. Their red samurai like armour complimented their green skin. One of the Prothean soldiers jolted violently as rounds punctured his body. The lead Prothean looked upon the Collector horde with anger and unleashed his biotic attack. But instead of a cobalt blue, it was green. His biotics were green. Protheans that had fallen from grace were tossed about the great hall like ragdolls, screeching in pain.

When the Protheans spoke, Jane understood everything. It was fluent English with an African accent. The lead Prothean soldier ordered his comrades to close the door as he dragged in his fallen brother. The

heavy blast doors sealed shut. Giving the Protheans some respite. They looked around and saw the carnage that war had brought upon them.

"How many have we lost?" He asked the VI.

"The Reapers have destroyed approximately three-hundred thousand lifepods."

He knelt down beside a pod and cracked it open. In it lay a heavily burnt Prothean.

"A third of our people," he muttered sadly.

The Prothean then mustered his men, and moved off to defend another Reaper attack.

"I think I can duplicate that to open the lifepod," Jane said, referring to the Prothean did earlier.

"You understood that?" Liara asked, surprise.

"You didn't?" Shepard tilted her head.

John shook his head, and so did Keyes. "No, all we saw were static," Essingdon said.

"Cerberus was trying to make sense of it without success," Liara said, placing a finger on her lips. "The Prothean cipher, it lets you see and understand as a Prothean would."

"Whatever it was, I saw the video. And how they sealed the lifepods."

"Perfect," the asari smiled, entering a few commands into her Omni-tool, "now we just need the signal to activate the stasis pod."

The Lab doors pinged as it opened, revealing the awaiting ODSTs. "Better wrap things up quickly sir," said Rook, "rearguard reports that they're under heavy attack."

"Any casualties on our end?"

"No sir."

John gave a slight nod, "let's get moving then."

The group moved along the complex under heavy fire as more, and more troops poured in.

"Dammit, they've got a gunship on us again!" Rook said.

John brought his Sabre onto bear with the cockpit and squeezed the trigger. The gunships wobbled and dropped. Its windshields were melted and the engine coughed out a thick billowing smoke. A column of fire erupted when the bird crashed onto the green fields, simmering the plains.

"It's down."

Jane moved up ahead of the formation, and sent a powerful shockwave forward. Men screamed as they were tossed like dolls. Metals screeched as the biotic wave tore a jagged hole through them.

Rook whistled at the carnage.

With the entire field clear, Shepard huffed as she fought off the fatigue. She had decided to push herself this hard because she knew, sooner or later. The dig site will be bombed, and she wanted to get the Prothean out as soon as possible.

"Don't strain yourself," John warned, "we'll make it."

Jane nodded, accepting his suggestion.

The group moved into another data room, with the ODSs covering their rear. Jane quickly tapped in a few commands into the console, rolling the video. Her eyes morphed from a cobalt blue to an ocean turquoise as her mind deciphered the video.

She watched as the Prothean gazed upon the ruins of a once magnificent city. Reapers descended from the clouds above and fired their main guns. Lances of energy licked the ruins below, racking up whatever defenders were left.

"We will sleep here until the Reapers are gone," said the lead Prothean, "then we shall arise, a million strong!"

"For the Empire!" the older one said.

"For the Empire," the former repeated, "head to your stasis pods."

The Protheans immediately broke off and headed for their designated areas.

"Victory," the Leader called.

"Yes?" the VI responded, materialising in a green hue.

"Broadcast the stasis signal, ready to all life pods."

"What of the refugees who are yet to reach the bunker?"

The Prothean paused, "their sacrifices will be honoured in the coming Empire."

An explosion tore through the facility as a blast-door was breached. Dozens of unarmed Collectors swarmed through, intent on killing their former brother. The Prothean readied himself, and headed into the fray.

The video then cut off as Jane returned back to reality.

"You understood that one too?" Liara asked.

"Yeah, I've got the signals the Protheans used to activate stasis mode."

"Excellent, then we have everything we need to open the pod."

Upon leaving, John found the ODS'Ts hunkering down, and engaged in a fierce firefight.

"Sitrep Lieutenant," John said.

"Cerberus got smart and stopped airdropping their own guys on top of us," Rook said, gesturing to a few crashed shuttles, "they're coming in on foot."

The SAWs roared as they scythed the advancing forces, melting through the Guardian's metal shields. Designated Marksmen hanged back and picked off any Engineers or Snipers.

"Okay, looks like they're pulling back," said Shepard, "we should get to the pod while we can."

Pulling back to the catwalk, resistance had increased exponentially. Smouldering holes riddled the walls as the gunners cut down dozens of Cerberus soldiers.

Jane remained in the centre of the formation this time, lobbing throw and warp attacks at the enemy. And under the cover of biotics, the Helljumpers advanced in a shock-and-awe charge. Cerberus was thrown off by the sheer ferocity of the attack. Troopers hastily retreated, exposing themselves to the ODS'T marksmen.

Eventually, the group made it back to the catwalk, that was strewn with molten metal and smouldering wreckages.

"Friendlies, coming in!" Rook said into the TEAMCOM.

"Wow, helluva fight," Garrus muttered.

"Glad of you to join us, Vakarian," Vega joked.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

The ODS'Ts moved back into their original covering positions, allowing Shepard to crack the lifepod open. She opened the console, and entered in the exact keys. Locks began to pop and hiss as the animation process began.

"There you got it," Liara breathed, gazing upon the frost covered Prothean, "Goddess. It may take time for him to fully regain consciousness."

Slowly, the mist disappeared, and the Prothean began to twitch. His four eyelids fluttered as his senses rushed back to him. As soon as he gained full awareness, he looked around in shock. Unexpected to see humans, asari and turian crowding him, his body flared green, emitting a biotic shockwave.

Liara and Jane were instantly tossed back, with only enough time for the Spartans to catch them. Garrus, thankful to be standing far enough away, was unharmed.

The Prothean just stared in shock as he stumbled away. There were at least sixteen guns trained on him.

"Be careful, he's confused!" Liara warned, gesturing the men to lower their weapons.

Stumbling across the catwalk, the Prothean gasped in horror as what was once a metropolis, was now artefacts in an idyllic countryside.

"Remember, it's been fifty thousand years for us," said Liara, "but for him it's only beenâ€|"

Jane never got to hear what her friend said, once she touched the Prothean's shoulder. Soon everything began to unfold, revealing why the Prothean's never rised. Lifepods had been compromised; anyone who was unshielded would die from the neutron bombardment.

Shepard watched the Prothean, stuck in his pod, waiting out the bombardment.

"The bunker is secured, Commander Javik," the VI said.

"What is left of it," Javik said darkly, "a few hundred people, how am I to rebuild an Empire from that?"

"Reactors have been compromised; automated reactivation is now no longer possible."

"Clarify."

"You will now remain in stasis until another culture discovers this bunker. This may however, lead to power shortages."

"Do not shut more pods off!" Javik ordered, yelling with all his might, "I need the few that are still alive!"

"Personnel will be triaged accordingly," the VI responded calmly, "you will be the voice of our people."

"I will be more than that," Javik promised.

Being pulled back to reality, Shepard stumbled before steadying herself.

"How many others?" Javik asked, with his hands dug into the soil.

"Just you," Shepard answered.

The ODS'Ts began to encircle the area.

"You can understand me?" Jane asked.

"Yes," the Prothean confirmed, "now that I have read your physiology, your nervous system. I understand your language."

"While you were reading me, I was seeingâ€|?"

"Our last moments," Javik said softly, "a failure."

"Your people did everything they could," Shepad comforted, "they

never gave up. I could use some of that commitment now."

"Chief?" it was Stanforth, "whatever you did sir, we're seeing more enemy units being routed to your pos."

Javik turned around, and gazed upon the attack force. "Human, asari, turian. I'm surrounded by primitives."

"Human? Primitives?" said 256, "quite the contraryâ€|"

"Six, now's not the time," said Keyes, "he already has enough to comprehend."

"Of course, Reclaimer."

"It's not safe here, will you join us?" Shepard asked.

"You fight the Reapers?" Javik asked.

"Yes."

"Then we will see."

****XXxxXX****

"_When we uncovered the archives, we had thousands of experts analysing it. We learned so much of our lost past, our former glory. But here, on this day, we will reclaim what was once ours, and fulfil what the Forerunners desired."_

Doctor Catherine Halsey, addressing the UEG/UNSC populace

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Whew, almost there guys.****

****Please reviewâ€| I live of thatâ€| kinda. Also, quick question, are there any girls reading this? (It's a social experiment I'm doing for school.)****

21. Welcome to the Ark

****XXxxXX****

"_Are we a free society? My opinion, yes. Despite all of what I've seen. We do live in a free society. "_

Operations Manager Edmund Flint

"_But the things we do, we keep the population in the dark about the Human-Covenant War. ONISAD Operatives are notorious for shooting unarmed kids. How does that make us a free society? The media is subjective, not objective."_

Operations Executive Manager Anna Greenfield

_Tough decisions must be made, for society to remain ordered and free. Yet, there are some out there, who skewer things; they begin to

see us as fascist rulers, hell bent on power. The last thing we want to do is have total control. It goes against our beliefs, it goes against how we were raised, and it's a path to ruin. The Innies, they fail to see this, they paint us as baby killers, control freaks and manipulators. The irony of our job is becoming monsters to those who call us monsters. But in the end, we are a free, democratic society. Our people can walk down the street without fear of being shot; our people can sleep in their beds at night, without having to fear about being dragged out into the street, our government is afraid of angering us. That spells freedom to me."_

Operations Manager Edmund Flint

XXxxXX

**UNSC Military File**

_UNSC Army Special Operations Group; Airborne Corp

>Nickname: Blood Talons
Motto: "Strike from the skies!"

>Size: Five Divisions
_

_Role:

>Direct Action
Special reconnaissance

>Counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency
Airborne and air assault

>Clearance diving
Personnel recovery

>Search and destroyrecover

>Joint-Operations with ONISAD and NavSpecWar

_Equipment:

>JetpacksThruster packs â€" Glider packs

>UNSC Airborne BDU
M10G Sidearm

>EMBR-240 Designated Marksman Rifle
M87R-S SMG

>SABR-L
M787D SAW LMG

>004 Combat Knife
M102 Plasma Longsword_

_The Airborne is renowned for its rapid precision strikes, which pave the way for the main bulk of allied forces. These soldiers are extremely disciplined and handle themselves professionally. They never act in excess, and never show brutality (of the same level as the ODSF 105__th__ Division).__

_Addendum: There appears to be a one-way rivalry between the Airborne and ODSFs. ODSF members feel "threatened" when around Airborne personnel.__

XXxxXX

SSV **_NORMANDY SR-2**_

Jane stood in her usual officer's fatigues, addressing Admiral Steve Hackett in the Communications room. The Admiral's hologram was coated in a blue hue, and shimmered every so often.

"A living Prothean?" Hackett asked, raising his eyebrows.

"That's right, Admiral," Jane confirmed "but he's not quite what we expected."

"Commander before we commit our forces to a full assault on Cerberus,

we need to exam every possibility," the Admiral emphasised, clasping his hands behind his back. "If the Prothean can help us construct this device, we need his cooperation."

"Understood, Admiral," Jane nodded.

"We're losing colonies fast than we can evacuate," Hackett frowned, "we've never seen an enemy like the Reapers before."

"He has, Admiral."

"Can he help us?"

"I intend to find out."

"Good," Hackett nodded, "Cerberus slipped up and gave us a new weapon; don't let it go to waste."

The Admiral was about to cut the feed, when both parties received another entanglement transmission.

"Commander," said Traynor over the ship's intercom, "Admiral Anderson is on the comspeak."

"Patch it through," Shepard ordered.

Another hologram shimmered into existence next to Hackett's. The recent addition looked tired and battered. Anderson's armour was covered in scratches, scorch marks and dried blood.

"Shepard," he smiled, "aren't you a sight for sore eyes."

"What happened, Anderson?" Hackett asked, concerned.

"Reaper attack on the crash site," Anderson answered, "we barely managed to pull out before the nukes went off."

"Nukes?" Jane raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," Anderson confirmed, "the UNSC ship had a couple of nukes on board. When the Reapers damaged the reactor core, those nukes were going to blow. Vancouver is now experiencing a nuclear winter."

"Goddamn," Hackett muttered, "how are the men?"

"Battered but alive," Anderson replied, "the UNSC forces have taken a beating."

Around this time, Kahlee Sanders, John and Keyes entered the room, still in their full armour. A number of the crewmen stopped to look. Most of them were new additions, and so weren't entirely familiar with the Supersoldiers.

"Admirals," the Spartans saluted.

Kahlee smiled, and gave Anderson a look of relief.

"Gentlemen, Kahlee," Hackett acknowledged. "Have you heard from your friends yet?"

Keyes shook his head, "that's why we're here."

"We're doing it tough," Anderson said, "Captain Eli Redmond was killed in the attack, all nukes on board were detonated, unit strength down to seventy per cent, and three Intelligence officers cut off."

Intelligence officers, Keyes knew that was ONISAD's cover name. Replace 'officer' with 'operative', and suddenly, the meaning becomes totally different.

"With the ship gone, we're on the run now," said Anderson, "couple of recon teams say that the Reapers are concentrating on the cities, we can use that time to regroup on the rural areas. It doesn't sound pretty, but it's the only way."

"Hold on for just a bit longer," Shepard reassured, "we've linked up with another UNSC ship. They're taking us to UNSC controlled space."

"Good," Hackett smiled.

"Godspeed, Shepard," said Anderson.

The holograms faded and the links were cut, allowing Jane to slump and rest a bit.

"Are you okay?" the Chief asked.

"Fine," the Spectre sighed.

"You don't sound like it," said Keyes.

Jane wasn't really too sure, she'd been under a lot of stress lately, and the war wasn't yet in full swing. Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose, and remembered the day when she had met the UNSC forces on Earth, she noticed the level of familiarity between Keyes, and the three who stood out.

They must be the Intel guys, she thought. And in that moment, Jane realised that Keyes was worried about the safety of his friends.

"I'm fine, really," she said with a soft smile, "and I'm sure your friends are too."

"I hadn't realised it was this bad," said Sanders.

"Millions are dying by the day," Jane said, "anyway, how are the kids holding up?"

"They're fine, training with Jack in the shuttle bay. A lot of them are excited about the Prothean on board, and being in slipstream space. It was all theory when I was in school, never thought it would be put into application. The UNSC is absolutely remarkable. Also Jack seemed slightly unhappy that she couldn't join you," Kahlee answered.

Jane smirked, Jack had been one of the more gung-ho members of the

team back in the day.

Upon leaving the room, Liara called.

"Shepard, Keyes, I need you down at the port cargo hold, it's about our new guest."

"We're on our way."

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, CANADA, OUTSKIRTS OF VANCOUVER, RV POINT****

Fhajad's armour, very much identical to John's, was battered and riddled with scorch marks. The convoy was in no better shape, having lost a number of Warthogs and Badgers. In just a span of a few days, the UNSC force had been whittled down to seventy per cent effectiveness. Upon reaching the RV point which was outside the fallout radius, the Spartan called a halt.

"Webb!" Fhajad called over the COMs.

"Sir," the Captain answered.

"Orca reports that we're going to get a few Reaper units heading our way. Fire those APAMS at seven thousand."

"Seven thousand?"

"Affirmative."

When air was accelerated beyond a certain threshold, it would ignite into plasma. This firing method, was deemed one of the most effective against hordes of enemies. The Atlases rolled into position, perched on a ridge line. Their cannons swung into position and locked on.

"Target, range three kilometres," the gunners' yelled, peering at the long range optics, with a flick of a switch, the vehicles switched to their Railgun settings.

Having set the fuse, the tanks open fired. An ear splitting boom roared through the air, causing many to jolt in sudden shock. Those who weren't encased in full body armour, felt the tremors in the air.

Having a muzzle velocity of 7000km/h, the APAM rounds left a blazing firestorm of plasma in its wake. The tanks' frontal shields flared as they absorbed the heat wave. The rounds zeroed in on their targets, and the fuses detonated. The wave of plasma expanded as the tungsten pellets dispersed through the air.

Hundreds of Reaper units were vaporised in an instant, the ground they stood upon, was stripped of any life and covered in a layer of blackened glass.

"Target destroyed," a tank commander verified. "Good kill."

Sighting down the helmet's optics, Fhajad gazed upon the mushroom cloud in the distance; he couldn't help but think about those who

didn't make it out. Years of working with ONI had made him appear cold and heartless to an outsider. But underneath that hard exterior, Fhajad was heavily burdened by guilt and haunted by the horrors of unconventional warfare.

"_When you've been conditioned, you feel nothing when you kill a combatant. Overtime, you might get a sense of satisfaction. But if you're human, no amount of mental conditioning will ever make you feel comfortable about killing children, or your own friend. Yet you'll still do it anyway, because they ordered you to do so."_

That was what John told Fhajad, after a counter-insurgency operation many years ago. The two had been forced to kill a UNSC officer, who was a rebel sympathiser, and his hostage.

"Lieutenant Devonshire," the Spartan called.

"Yes sir," she responded, moving her cracked helmet.

"Get you're men on point and prepare to move."

"Copy sir," the Lieutenant nodded, she turned to her men and began to issue orders.

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, CANADA, OUTSKIRTS OF VANCOUVER, TUNNEL EXIT****

Arca awoke to the sound of an inhuman howl, his body cried in defiance as he tried to move. Fighting off unconsciousness, he realised that the Warthog was on its left side. His teammates were down, they weren't moving. Dull thumps came from all over the vehicle, _husks_, he thought.

"Guys?" he urged over the private TEAMCOM.

Greystone stirred, the shattered glass crunched as he moved. His black gauntleted hand grabbed an arm rest, pulling himself up.

"God, I feel like shit," he muttered, "is Bright up?"

"I am now," Lotus groaned. Having been the only one not wearing a seatbelt, the Operative was slumped unceremoniously against the door.

Husks began to crawl over the vehicles; one made it onto the passenger door, and began to bash the window. Shattered glass rain down on Arca as he pulled out his sidearm, the weapon coughed in quick succession, causing the deformity to collapse atop the door. He pushed the door open, rolling the husk off, and pulled himself out of the stricken vehicle. Aiming down the sights, he picked off a handful of husks, shredding their chests apart.

"We got to move!" Arca urged.

Greystone was the next to climb out of the vehicle, and tossed the former an Ember rifle. Arca gestured a sign of thanks and shouldered the weapon, keeping his team covered.

More husks swarmed Fifth Element's position. Arca and Greystone fired

their weapons until the mags went dry, forcing them to resort to their melee weapons. The blades hissed as the edge was shrouded by a thick plasma mist. Ionised air trailed in the wake of the weapons.

Arca slashed in a downward motion, severing one in half. Turning to his right, he decapitated a husk, and kicked another squarely in the chest, crushing its ribs. The Operative could hear the bones snap under the immense force, and cringed slightly.

Keeping his cousin covered, Greystone grabbed a husk's arm, and rammed his blade into his chest. The once-human being squirmed and buckled as he twisted the blade, and pulled it out, letting the husk crumble in a heap.

Once Lotus had finished grabbing all the available weapons inside the Warthog, he freed himself from the mangled vehicle, and open fired. The configured Sabre-H roared as it spewed out 16 rounds per minute. Husks were cut in half and reduced to piles of ash, pushing the horde back.

"Clear!" Lotus signalled.

"We're clear," Arca huffed, "let's grab what we can, and get moving."

The Operative looked upon the wrecked formation, and knew that there wasn't much that could be salvaged. Badgers were gutted through and through, and the Makos weren't in much better shape.

"Fifth Element, you there?" it was Fhajad calling them over the superluminal COMs.

"Yeah, we're still in one piece," said Lotus.

"But all our guys are dead, vehicles are destroyed," Arca added, "we're coming to you on foot."

"Copy that."

****XXxxxXX****

****THE ARK, ONI SECTION 0, NORTHFOLD****

Edmund rolled up his white sleeved shirt as he walked along the balcony. He gazed admiring over the sun embraced view surrounding him. Utilitarian design were detrimental to those with stressful jobs, thus, the ONI facility, had been constructed within a massive river system, complete with falls.

To the unknowing eye, the entire area would've looked like a hotel resort. Oak trees genetically modified to have golden red leaves, and flower patches, lined the olive cream coloured buildings. A river with a soft current flowed between the structures, causing the employees to dub HQ a, Rivendell.

Moving across the bridge with a milk tea in hand, Edmund found a seat overlooking a waterfall. Placing his drink on a stand, the Operations Manager eased himself into the recliner and relaxed. These were one of the few moments where he could just sit down, without a care in the

world.

"Sir?" a woman with a striking appearance, called out.

Flint opened his eyes, and turned his attention to the newcomer. She wore a dark grey shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to beneath her elbows. Her shapely legs were bare, accentuated by her low-heel shoes, but covered by a modest black skirt. Tucking a way a loose strand of her red hair, she handed Flint a paper folder.

"Thank you Anna," Edmund said in a professional tone, hiding his discomfort about being interrupted.

Though, Greenfield could still see through him. "I know you don't like being interrupted during break, but c'mon, drop the formalities. We've known each other since uni, your professionalism creeps me out."

"That's the whole point," Edmund smirked, "don't like it, send Desh to hand me the folder."

"That's a bit cruel, Desh is still new here," Anna said, placing a hand on her hip.

Edmund straightened out his tie, and swung his legs off the chair. The heel of his dress shoes clicked softly as they touched the marble tiles. He flicked open the folder, and began reading.

"Sixth Element, deployment has been censored," Flint frowned, "not classified."

"Exactly, full level clearance, but we don't know where six are."

"Did you forward it to Hood?"

"Halsey and Essingdon too," Anna nodded.

Without warning, the facility began to rumble, windows began to crack. Greenfield lost her footing, landing herself on top of Edmund. An office section exploded, showering the balcony below with glass and debris. The alarms began to blare, and the Airborne garrison mobilised to evacuate personnel.

"Get off me," Edmund groaned, being crushed by Anna.

"Sorry," she said, pulling out herself up.

Edmund got out of the chair, and activated his tacpad. A small screen materialised on the wrist mounted device, and displayed a menu. The Operations Manager entered the facility's security network, and discovered that his level had been destroyed.

"It's not Innies," Anna said, checking her tacpad, "if it was, the attack would be facility wide."

"The explosion took out our entire floor," Flint murmured, "whoever was on duty down there is now dead."

"Oh god," Greenfield whispered, "Carter's down there."

"Shit," Edmund sighed, running a hand through his black hair. Sliding on his AR glasses, he gestured for Greenfield to follow him. The two lapsed into a silence as they moved towards the transport bay, pistols drawn.

A couple of Airborne soldiers formed a protective formation around Edmund and Anna, having identified who the two were.

"Sitrep?" Edmund ordered.

"Sir, the explosion came from sublevel thirty-foor, D-wing."

"Did anyone make it out?"

"I don't know, sir, the lower levels are be evac'd right now."

Edmund was hustled onto a Greyhawk with Chief Analyst David Simpson. Airborne Corporal Craig Wilson closed the door and banged on the hatch, clearing the pilot for take-off.

Anna tracked the vessel as it headed south. Time seemed to slow down to a crawl as her eyes widened in horror. A cobalt blue beam stab through the air, and slashed the Greyhawk. The vehicle shuddered and exploded in a brilliant fireball.

"Lookout!" Wilson cried. He quickly grabbed Greenfield and shielded her from the blast. Debris rained down on his digital grey livery armour, causing the shields to flare.

Snapping herself out of shock, Greenfield registered reality, and began to prioritise.

"It's not safe to go by air," said Anna, "we've got to go by car."

"I'll grab my squad."

"No," Greenfield countermanded, "someone want's my team dead, the less people with me. The lower the profile."

"Yes ma'am," Craig complied, "lead the way."

Anna led the Corporal to the staff vehicle bay. Greenfield's car had a bureaucratic and classy feel to it. It was a marvellous silver Audi sedan, with LED lights and a powerful engine.

"I'm driving," she said, placing her hand on the door handle. It took a second for the car's computer.

"Welcome, Ms Greenfield," the vehicle's system greeted.

Wilson entered from the passenger door, and checked his Sabre-L's mag. "Nice car."

"Thanks," Anna said, as she turned the engine on.

The engine roared to life as the power flooded through, allowing Greenfield to floor the vehicle out of the parking bay. Wilson kept a

firm grip on the handles, to keep himself from bouncing around in the cabin.

Sunlight glinted off the vehicle's hood as Anna pulled onto the highway, weaving through the holiday traffic.

"Where are we headed, ma'am?" Craig asked.

"Hood," Anna answered, "keep an eye out for anyone after us."

"Copy that."

Whoever made an attack on Section 0 would definitely have some pull, the best place Greenfield could get protection, is with Fleet Admiral Hood.

Three civilian Warthogs began to accelerate, breaking from cover and entering a formation.

"Heads up, we've got company," Wilson said, flicking the weapon safety off.

"Shit," Anna murmured. The tires screeched as she threw the vehicle into a sharp turn.

"Should we call back up?"

"If you haven't noticed, they've jammed communications," said Anna.

"What?" Wilson said incredulously, "but you can't just jam the COMs, unless— oh, god no."

"You catch on quick," Greenfield complimented, "surprised you're not a spook."

"How the hell do we escape from a brass who wants us dead?"

"We go to Hood," said Anna.

"What if it is Hood who wants to kill us?"

"If Hood wanted us dead, he would've bombed that facility. Besides, cold blood isn't his style. Believe or not, we have an honourable person leading us."

Confronted with the fact of imminent death from betrayal, Anna noticed Wilson's level of formality dropped very quickly.

The Audi reached a very long clear stretch of road, allowing the Warthogs a very clear line of fire. The top hatches opened, and machine gun turrets extended.

"Wonder why they haven't called in air strikes?" the Corporal pondered.

"Don't jinx us. It's too high profile anyway."

"As if Hogs with guns wasn't high profile enough," Craig muttered.

Bolts of energy peppered the area around the car, burning through asphalt and splashing on the Audi's shields.

"Shields down to half, take those guys out!" Anna roared.

The car's defences were designed to stand against light arms fire, not a merciless barrage from three energy turrets. The shields flared, and shorted out, leaving an inch of armour standing in the way of death.

Wilson turned round in his seat and aimed through the rear windows. A steady stream of cobalt energy shot out from the car and towards the lead Warthog. The rounds splashed over the armour guard, immersing the gunner in a mist of molten metal, forcing him to take cover. The Corporal unleashed another burst at the turret, melting its barrel and putting it out of action.

"One down," he said calmly.

"While two are still shooting at us," Anna quipped.

The car's hull began to take damage, the entire boot was torn to molten shreds as bolts bashed against them. Anna swerved wildly across the road, causing hundreds of shots to go wide and slam into other cars. Dozens of vehicles crashed into one another in the ensuing chaos, but the Warthogs just ploughed on through.

Wilson brought up his Sabre and sprayed the entire front of the lead Warthog. UNSC Hogs didn't carry shields, their armour more than made up for what was needed. The specialised glass composite bubbled and boiled from the extreme heat. Craig smiled with satisfaction as he watched the driver slump in his seat, and the vehicle careen aimlessly to the left.

With one Hog down, the remaining two closed the gap and continued firing. The Corporal grunted in pain as his shields flare and his shoulder burn.

"Ah shit, I'm hit," he cursed.

Anna swung the Audi around the bend, with energy bolts biting close on its heels. She let out a cry as one of the wheels were shot off, causing the car to roll. Glass shattered and the metal frame screeched as the vehicle slid down the highway. Slamming into a cinderblock, the car came to a halt.

Craig undid his seatbelt buckle, and pried the door open. He could hear cars, screeching to a halt.

"Ma'am?" he called out.

"I'm here," Greenfield coughed.

She crawled out from the wreckage of her car, and drew her pistol. Anna clutched her side, blood oozing sluggishly out.

Seeing the wound, Craig grabbed a can of biofoam from his medical pouch, inserted the nozzle and squeezed the handle. Anna bit down hard on her bottom lip as a fiery burn spread throughout her

insides.

"That should hold you for now."

Greenfield was about to say something, but was cut off from the sudden roar of turrets, followed by the scream of civilians. Wilson dragged the Operations Executive Manager to the safety of an overturned truck. The driver must've been hit by one of the rounds, because there was nothing left of his torso.

"We can't hold out forever," Anna said. She leaned out of cover, and emptied a clip into the windshield of a Hog. The driver of the vehicle coughed and sputtered as the bullets slam into his chest, spraying the cabin with his blood.

The Hogs came to a halt, and the occupants dismounted, guns blazing and turrets roaring. Lances of energy melted the Audi's frame, showering the road with molten metal.

Wilson broke cover and fired at his attackers, forcing them to break formation and shield themselves behind the Hogs. He noticed that the threats were wearing civilian outfits coupled with an armoured vest.

"Cover's getting ropery," the Corporal said, pulling Anna back further.

The Airborne soldier broke cover again, and managed to kill another attacker before being forced back.

"He's down," he said coolly.

One man cried out in pain as Anna shot him. Two rounds punctured his armour, snapping his ribs and toppling him over. She pulled herself back behind the rapidly thinning truck hull, and reloaded her pistol. Greenfield yelped in pain as energy bolts passed through the metal plates, showering her with sparks.

Craig grunted as the cobalt lances overload his shields and burned through his helmet. The Corporal was dead before his Sabre hit the ground.

Anna closed her eyes and swore inwardly. She wasn't a Field Operative, just an admin with a good aim. She could hold off a small group of lightly armed combatants, but not seven men with heavy turrets. Greenfield clutched her pistol awaiting death to claim her.

Sirens began to wail through the air, bringing Anna's hopes up. The local police force thundered down the highway, stopping at the overturned truck. Patrol cars and Hogs formed a defensive perimeter as they bore the brunt of the retaliation.

A sleek black SUV then pulled up next to Anna, and out stepped two very familiar people, Major Edward Buck and Colonel Veronica Dare, both wearing battle dress uniforms with light armour. Buck yelled some orders to a squad of ODSTs troops to flank the hostiles before moving off to coordinate the men.

Dare remained behind to tend to Greenfield.

"Hey Anna," she said softly, picking the Intelligence Officer up gingerly.

"Hey Veri," Greenfield wheezed, clutching her bloodied side as she was placed into the backseat.

"What happened?" Dare asked.

"Edmund and I were at work. Then an explosion tore our floor apart," tears began to streak down Anna's face. "We were lead to the evac point, Edmund got onto a Greyhawk, while I was to wait for the next one. His plane was shot out of the sky a minute later."

"I'm so sorry," Dare said softly. Having been transferred into different sections, Veronica Dare was now part of Section 0, monitoring Section 1. So she knew about the local ONI facilities.

"I had Wilson to tag along with me," Greenfield continued, gesturing to the fallen Blood Talon. "I knew we had to go by car, or else we'd end up getting shot down."

"Clearly someone wanted you and your team dead," said Dare.

"Yeah, that's why I was going to go to Hood."

"Did you find anything recently? Anything that would make you a target?"

"Maybe, but I'm not talking about now, not here."

"Okay, we'll get you to Hood."

Weapons fire filled the air as the police force engaged the unknown hostiles, eventually the fight died down, signalling that all of the attackers had been killed. Buck and Dare returned the SUV and drove down the highway with a contingent of ODSTs in tow.

Anna leaned back into the seat, and let the tears flow. Edmund had been the only person she could truly confide in, ever since she arrived at ONI. Now he was gone, her best friend will never return.

****XXxxXX****

****SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, SLIPSPACE, ENROUTE TO COALITION
CONTROLLED SPACE****

Javik, had seemed bemused yet slightly annoyed. Jane herself had half expected the Prothean to be of a more noble calibre. But he was more of a cynic, suppressing a deep, strong anger against the Reapers.

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John and Keyes on the other hand, seemed to be expecting the reaction. Maybe John can relate, the Spectre thought. She reasoned that after witnessing the downfall of a proud civilisation, the happiness and joy within a person fades. Javik mainly talked about Prothean biology, and their unique ability to transfer complex thought through touch.

Liara was jumpy as ever, bursting with excitement, and bombarding Javik with salvos of questions. The Prothean's replies were mostly cynical laced with a very dry sense of humour. Jane could swear she heard the two Spartans chuckle every time Javik retorted.

"Thanks for the talk, Javik," Shepard said politely.

"Yes, it has been, amusing," he replied.

John then left for the hangar bay, while Keyes and Liara headed to the mess hall to continue working on the Crucible.

Shepard on the other hand, decided to return to the war room to talk to Victus. She found him at the console, busy reading a demoralising report from Palaven.

"Primarch,"

"Shepard," he greeted, "I had a talk to Javik earlier. He is not what I expected, but then again, I'm not so surprised. In his shoes, I'd probably be no different."

"What do you mean?"

"Many expect that Javik would be 'noble' and 'wise'â€|"

"But?" Shepard inquired.

"But, he's just like us, he watched his civilisation fall. He's cynical, and bitter."

"I guess I'd be the same if I was in his position."

â€|

The sense of shock was overwhelming at first, but quickly died down when rationality came into play. Javik was amazed by the sheer stupidity and ignorance that this cycle had shown. _They would all be dead if it wasn't for the Commander, and I'd be still waiting in that pod,_ he thought. The Protheans had left behind so many messages of warning that few heeded. Fortunately, those who believed in the warnings did take action which gave this cycle valuable time. _Valuable time that was squandered by the foolish._

Javik found the level of biological markers on the ship staggeringly high, the species of this cycle had a habit of leaving marks everywhere. Anything he touched would most likely hold a story within. He always felt the need to wash his hands and wear gloves to stop himself from being overwhelmed by the amount of information.

Then, just about when he was to sit down and meditate, the floating machine referred to as 256 Eclipsing Knowledge, entered.

"What are you doing here?" Javik asked coldly.

"Collecting data," the machine said cheerfully. It sounded to animate to be a virtual intelligence; it had to be a fully sentient AI.

"You are a danger to everyone aboard this ship," the Prothean said

bluntly.

"A danger?" the machine asked incredulously, "hardly. I wish to serve the Reclaimers and end the threat of the Reapers."

"Since when does a machine, 'wish'?"

"Since it develops a moral code," the monitor answered. "Why do you view machines with such great malice?"

"Because it is the machines that will cause the death of organics, it was the machines that destroyed my civilisation."

"I am sorry about the fall of the Prothe-"

"No you're not," Javik interrupted. "Who are the Reclaimers, the masters or the pawns of the Reapers? I know machines can lie too."

256 floated closer to Javik, his blue hue illuminating the darkened space.

"Reclaimers, it is the term used to define humans."

"And what does it mean now?" Javik asked, his interested having peaked.

"Humans who have synthesised with cybernetics such as nanites and Positronic brain lattices to achieve a higher level of existence," the Monitor explained.

"That is insane!" Javik almost yelled, "Combining yourself with a machine makes you vulnerable to control of the machines! It happened in my cycle!"

"Hardly," the Monitor reassured, "the nanites and the Positronic brain are extensions of the user. Those cybernetics are enslaved to the beings' nervous system. Your level of ignorance is very distressing, but then again, your race was always one-sided and barbaric."

Javik stared at the machine. Did it just insult him and his people?

"Leave my presence before I toss you out the airlock."

"You are in no position to make threats, Prothean," 256 said.

This machine was testing his patiences.

"And why is that?" Javik growled, covering himself in a biotic field.

"Your biotics are useless against me, in the time it takes you to blink, it a heartbeat to you, but eternity to me," the Monitor answered, its blue hue changing to red. Javik's field dissipated. "I have been existed for longer than your empire. To these beings, you are invaluable. To me and the Reclaimers, we can just remake you. Your knowledge will not die with you. We can resurrect it."

Javik knew what the machine said was true. He held no power or authority over it, and that was just insulting. A machine, surpassing him. But it also mentioned that should he die, his knowledge could be reclaimed. _It must know a way to bring back my people_.

"And how will you resurrect my knowledge?" Javik asked, maintaining his ego.

"Genetic memory, it is a unique trait of your species," the Monitor returned to its calm blue colour, "this lack of rationale is truly disturbing, Prothean. Your race may have been barbaric, but they were at least intelligent."

Now this insult; was aimed at Javik, personally. The Prothean, in all his life, had never encountered a machine that was so _alive_. It was unnerving.

"Leave me," Javik said.

"As you wish, Prothean," 256 said, and immediately left the room.

Javik had heard enough for the day, and decided to meditate.

â€|

John had kept his armour on, but placed his helmet aside as he watched the biotic students train in the cargo bay.

"Hey Tinnie," Jack greeted, letting her students take a break.

"Jack," the Chief acknowledged.

"Can I ask you something?" the biotic asked, her tone becoming softer.

The Spartan nodded.

"When you were trained to become a Supersoldier, what was it like, as a kid, I mean?"

The Spartan looked at her quizzically.

"Don't play dumb Tinman; it doesn't take a genius to know that you've been enhanced as a kid. I just want to know, what it was like from your end."

John recalled when Shepard had told him about Jack's past. The former convict had a troubled history, and a brutal upbringing. The Supersoldier couldn't fully relate because his training had some degree of warmth and kindness within. He was forever loyal to his masters, Jack turned on hers whenever she could.

"It was tough, but they taught us well," John said, "we gave up our childhood so others could have a future. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Thanks tin," that's all I wanted to know, Jack said softly. "Okay

kids, up and at them."

The biotic mentor returned to her students, and practiced another drill.

Shepard, who had just arrived in time to hear John's words, rested her forearms on the railings and looked at him.

"I take it you heard what I said," the Spartan stated.

"I kind of figured out the whole augmentation thing about a week after I met you," Jane said.

"_Thing_, eloquent," John smirked.

"Ass," the Spectre chuckled. She had never seen him so happy before. Maybe it was the prospect of finally getting to see his people, and his new home. "But yeah, no one grows to your height and gets your build."

"Build?" the Spartan arched an eyebrow.

"You're not lanky," Jane said, carefully.

"Fourth Gen were augmented as adults," said John, "and they're my build, maybe a bit shorter and smaller."

Come to think of it, Rook looked like a four, probably a liaison for the Helljumper, John reflected. The Spartan remembered that the ODS lieutenant was bigger than most and moved with superb accuracy and fluidity. _Can't believe I missed that, must be getting tired_.

John had rarely slept; in fact, his augmentations practically negated the need for sleep, unless of extreme fatigue. And with the recurring nightmares, the Spartan had put off sleeping for days on end.

"Well then, guess it was just a lucky hunch," said Shepard, snapping John out of his thoughts.

In reality, the Spectre never fully considered that the Spartan was augmented and trained since childhood. It had crossed her mind of course, but never fully accepted. However, with John indirectly admitting about the enhancements, it did make everything seem more, tragic.

"Commander?" it was Joker, "We've got a call from _Elysium Sun_."

"Copy, I'm coming up to the bridge."

â€|

With Stanforth appearing on the bridge's holotank, it made it easier for Jane to see how he looked. He was biologically in his early thirties, with strong features, tanned skin, black hair and brown eyes.

"We're coming out of slipspace soon, sir," he said, addressing the Spartan, "we'll need to check in with the nearby patrol."

"Copy," John said.

Jane found slipspace to be quite fascinating, specifically the theory behind it, which John had explained intrinsically. Liara was standing right beside her, and seemed to be gripping on the back of Joker's seat with all her might. She too was excited about slipspace.

"Liara, I know this is exciting and all, but please, you're scratching the leather," said the helmsman.

"Sorry, Joker," Liara apologised, "it's just, slipspaceâ€¦ it's absolutely magnificent."

"It's quite a leap forward too," Keyes added, he had a hand shoved in his lab coat pocket, while the other was holding a pipe.

"What do you mean?" the Asari asked.

"Well, with our older formulas and technology, piggy backing without a physical lock isn't the smartest of ideas."

"Wait, what?" Joker asked, blood draining out of his face.

"The older method of slipspace travel is tearing a hole into the fabric of space. Anything near the ship will be torn apart by the rupture."

"So how is this any different?"

"It's a surgical cut, faster travel time, and more stable. Any ship travelling in the slipspace wake of another ship, won't be ripped apart."

"Well that's comforting," Joker said sarcastically. "Thankfully you guys don't use it to cause hell on the enemy."

"Who says we don't?" Keyes smirked.

Joker starred at him blankly.

"Coming out of slipspace in ten," Stanforth said over the COM, "be ready."

"Ready," said Joker, leaning back into his seat.

The entire crew watched as a dark hole, dotted with stars, began to open in the vast purple abyss. Like a shark, Elysium Sun glided out first, with the Normandy close behind. Having been preoccupied with other matters earlier, Shepard didn't get to see Elysium Sun. But now that she had a full view of the ship, it was absolutely fearsome.

The sleek ship's near blackbody hull was barely illuminated by the light of slipstream space. It's wings were angled down, giving it a predatory look. In all aspects, it looked exactly like the Watchful Eye, albeit with a smaller size.

As the two ships entered normal space, they were greeted by two UNSC

Destroyers.

"Look at the size of those things," Joker breathed.

"The _Normandy_'s sensors show that these two ships are one kilometre long and that their power output far outmatch all known dreadnoughts," EDI added.

"Hampton-class destroyers, beautiful, aren't they?" said Keyes, informing every one of the ships' class.

"Goddess," Liara marvelled.

Like the destroyers' predecessors, they were of angular, and had a grey and black livery colour scheme. The ships reminded Shepard of the sharks that used to prowl the waters of Earth.

"Yes they are," said John.

Destroyers? Jane thought, _those things are destroyers? They're massive. Logistically, there's no way they could be powered by eezo. Has to be a different power source._

"Destroyers are the heavy cousins of the frigates, so, you're frigates are about the same size, right?" Joker inquired, his eyebrow arched.

"Yes," said Keyes.

Joker whistled, "damn. Suddenly I feel very small."

EDI turned and looked at Joker. "okay, okay," the helmsman said, raising his hands, "you look small."

"Goddess," Liara whispered, leaning closer to the windows. "That level of firepower."

Mordin would love it here, Jane thought. "EDI, do you have any idea where we are?"

"Very little, Shepard," the AI responded, "I have no access to the extranet. We are beyond the Outer Rim."

"That fast," Liara pondered, "slipspace is that fast?"

"With the technology we have now, yes," Keyes answered.

EDI used the bridge's holoprojector and plotted the current position of the _Normandy_. Using trigonometric formulas and astronomical referencing, the AI managed to pinpoint the ship's current whereabouts to a small margin of error.

"Attention UNSC _Divinus_ and UNSC _Swift Winds_, this is the UNSC _Elysium Sun_, we're bringing in the SSV _Normandy_," Stanforth broadcasted over the public channels.

"Copy that _Elysium Sun_,"

"Miranda," Keyes whispered.

"Who?" Liara asked, sounding slightly suspicious and jealous. Thankfully, no one noticed.

"My sister," Keyes replied.

"I see, family reunion then," the Asari's expression relaxed.

"Yeah, I guess so," Keyes said. He flicked on his superluminal COM and tapped into the channels. "Hey Miri."

"Donnie?" Miranda called back, "what are you doing here? I thought you were at Earth."

"Long story."

"Alright, tell me when we get back. Group Two should be here to relieve us soon."

Brilliant flashes of purple washed over the stationary ships as two more destroyers and frigate exited slipspace.

"I'm assuming the smaller one is the frigate," said Joker.

"Yes," Keyes nodded.

The crew was silent as they listened over the intercom. The ships they had known and grew up with were nothing like what they had seen.

The ship was a Wales-class frigate, the mainstay of the UNSC fleets. They had light armour, high manoeuvrability and moderate firepower, making them excellent flanking ships and troop carriers. Unlike their heavy cousins, the frigate contained a contingent of wings, allowing the ships to perform support roles. Overall, the Wales-class was angular yet curvy, and sported a light grey colour scheme. The wings were straight, not angled like the destroyers.

"Group two is here, contacting Hood, let's head home," said Miranda.

With the Normandy being the "weaker" ship, the UNSC vessels formed a defensive triangle around the Stealth Frigate. The two Destroyers at the front, and the Prowler at the rear. As the formation turned starboard, Shepard was awed by the sight she saw.

"Great goddess," Liara's eyes widened, "the scales, it must've been a colossal undertaking."

Murmurs spread throughout the ship as the crew gazed upon the immense sight. For John, the view symbolised that the sacrifices of the millions did not go in vain. The Ark looked to be in fine condition, orbited by the seven Halo rings. And surrounding the Forerunner superstructure formation, were Globular Clusters and solar systems. The Spartan could see the steady stream of light from the shipping lanes, stretching from installation to installation. Further on, the lanes would disappear into slipspace portals. John deduced that those ships were bound for the colonies within the solar systems.

"There's Majestic and Exultant Supremacy," Keyes pointed out.

The formation quickly passed over the two gigantic ships, allowing the crew to grasp the size and magnitude of the powerful vessels.

My god, Shepard thought.

"They're the size of the Citadel," Traynor guffawed.

Everything Jane had seen so far, made her hopeful about the Galaxy's chance to win the war. It put her mind at ease, but it did make it wonder.

As the formation neared the Ark, Shepard marvelled at the level of activity on the Installation. _So this is what it could've been for me_, Jane wondered. The ships entered the superstructure's atmosphere, and slowly taxied towards the ports. The destroyers docked first, while the _Elysium Sun_ headed for the ONI Ports. Gravity repulsors kicked in and stabilised the ships, easing them onto the docks.

"We're stable and doors clear, opening the hatch," said Joker. "This place is massive."

The entire crew began to file out of the ship via the shuttle bay, taking their surroundings. Shepard found the docks lacking in the utilitarian look like most Alliance naval yards. The UNSC Port was intricately designed and landscaped, accompanied with fountains and a myriad of genetically modified trees.

A company of ODSs in BDU had formed an honour guard at the base of the ship, at the end of the formation stood Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood and a few other personnel: Operations Executive Manager Anna Greenfield, Doctor Catherine Halsey, Major Edward Buck and Brigadier Veronica Dare. And soon, they were joined by the crew of _Divinus_ and _Swift Winds_.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Kahlee awed. The Director of Jon Grissom Academy led her students, behind James Vega and Garrus.

"Those ships, they're damn big," Vega said.

"And we'll need a lot of them to win this war."

The group arrived at the end of the welcoming party's formation. After a quick and brief introduction, Keyes turned to Anna.

"Where's Edmund?" the scientist asked.

"Donnie," his mother said softly.

"Oh god no," Keyes bowed his head. "What happened?"

"I'm so sorry," Miranda consoled.

Essingdon pinched the bridge of his nose, making mental preparations. It was around this time when Hood began to notice that the ODSs were becoming jumpy and excited. He leaned out a bit, a realised why.

There was a woman in a Navy blue military uniform; she was, by all definitions, strikingly beautiful. But it was not her presence that caused attention, nor the Monitor that floated beside her; in fact, it was the very person who was walking next to her. His armour was slightly battered, and he had his helmet tucked under one arm, allowing his brown hair to glisten under the artificial sun.

"It's him, he's still alive," Hood whispered.

Keyes turned, "didn't Stanforth include that in his message to you?"

"Must've forgotten," Hood shrugged, "it doesn't matter now though."

"John!" Cortana called out, running towards him.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. She instantly knew that the very lifelike, blue entity was an AI, like EDI. And by the looks of things, the Construct was very advanced. She seemed too alive to be simulated. Her body appeared to be made out of a calm blue, hardlight, similar to the Omni-tool. She also appeared to wearing what would be apparel suited for scientists.

The Spectre chuckled as she saw a bewildered expression spread across the Spartan's face as he was hugged by the AI. Jane marvelled at how alive the construct was when she laughed with joy.

Eventually, Cortana unwrapping her arms around the Spartan, beamed with pure happiness.

"Guess you did make it," the AI smiled, she then turned to Shepard, "aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Cortana, this is Shepard," John began, "Shepard, Cortana."

"Pleasure to meet you," the AI said, extended a hand.

Did not see that one coming, Jane thought. This AI was just so human. She wondered if Cortana was fallible too. The Spectre reached out, and accepted the gesture, surprised by the warm and soft texture of the AI's hand.

"Chief, it's good to see you," Miranda smiling as she walked over. Her white uniform were a contrast to Shepard's blue.

"Likewise, Keyes," John said, "nice to see you up and about."

Keyes then turned to face Shepard.

"Hi, I'm Commander Miranda Keyes."

"Commander Jane Shepard," the Spectre gave a curt bow, "I take it you're Essingdon's sister."

"Yes, older sister."

This time, Hood came over, and introduced himself. He looked truly magnificent in his white, standing-collar uniform, but unlike the

Spartans, it didn't sport a tie.

"Commander Shepard, I believe there's a lot of catching up to do, but it will have to wait, there are more pressing matters at hand."

"Of course sir, but we do not your help soon," Jane said, showing the level of desperation that the Galaxy was in.

"I do realise that, right now, I will need to reorganise the mobilised fleets, and there are some internal affairs I must deal with."

Shepard was fully aware of the reinforcing fleets for Operation Homecoming. So she was thankful that they wouldn't have to wait a few weeks of preparations for a large military scale operation.

"Hey, Miri," Essingdon called, "how about you, mum and Cortana take these guys to the museum, bring them up to speed. I'll take Six and clear things up with Hood and HighCom."

"Okay," Miranda complied, "I'll get the buses over."

Who's the mum? Jane wondered, but she didn't voice her question.

"John, there are some components in your armour that need to be upgraded, leave it with the techs and they'll handle the rest."

The Spartan nodded, heading back to the ship to grab his black ceremonial dress uniform.

â€|

The convoy of buses hummed down the highway with a contingent of Airborne forces in Warthogs. Jane could hear the kids talk excitedly about what, well, everything.

"So Javik, why didn't you come down from the _Normandy_ earlier?" Garrus asked.

"I wanted to observe," the Prothean replied, "running blind is for the foolish."

"Okay, so, see anything?"

"The Constructs, they are _alive_, like us. It is concerning."

"Yeah, it's a bit scary, but isn't EDI alive?"

"EDI is an abomination."

"Don't say that," Joker said, "she's sitting right next to me."

Javik snorted.

Shepard shook her head; the Prothean was such a cynic and stuck in his old ways. But at least, he was honest and blunt. A trait she respected and despised.

"Why do you guys still have cars when you have better technology than ours?" Cortez asked.

"It's a security issue," the Spartan answered, straightening his tie.

"You'd be surprised at how dirty the Innies play," Cortana added.

So lifelike, Jane thought. She looked at Cortana, the Doctor Catherine Halsey who was sitting next to her.

"I can't help but notice that you two look alike," said Shepard.

"Well, Doctor Halsey is the mother of Miranda Keyes and Essingdon Keyes," Cortana said, "and I'm her digital copy."

That explains everything, Jane thought, "I hope I look that good when I get to your age."

Halsey laughed, "Don't worry Jane; Donnie would probably want to get everyone kitted out."

The buses eventually pulled up to the Museum of Humanity. The expansive pathway was lined with a meticulously planned garden, lined with Chinese maples and golden leaf oak trees. There was something peaceful, about the estate.

"Welcome to the Museum of Humanity, everybody," said Miranda, stepping off the vehicle.

Airborne troops dismounted their Hogs and moved to defensive positions. Unlike the ODSTs, the Blood Talons were wearing their BDUs with light armour. The temperature was at a comfortable 21 degrees Celsius. So most of the soldiers had their sleeves rolled up.

Sanders was busy rounding up the students, and for a woman of her age, she was looked surprisingly young. "Okay kids, gather round. I'm pretty sure this is all very exciting for you all."

A glass atrium welcomed the group as they walked into the foyer; there was a fountain in the middle, a caf   to right, and a souvenir shop to the left.

"Sanders," Miranda called, "I suggest you let the kids loose, they'll piece everything they need to know in time."

"A history lesson," Jack sighed, "wondrous joy. I'll make sure the kids don't get into trouble."

"Good idea," the Director said. She quickly dispersed the students, allowing them to view the exhibits on their own. "Miranda, are you sure security won't be a bit strained?" she asked, referring to the Airborne.

"They'll be fine," Keyes reassured. She then turned to John. "Chief, meet back here when Donnie arrives."

John nodded, and Miranda headed off. Garrus, Javik and Vega grouped together, and moved towards the gardens. Traynor, Liara and Cortez left for the 21st Century wing, while Joker and EDI decided to just sit down at the café, with Halsey and Cortana.

It was a working week day, so there weren't that many people around in the museum, just a few off-duty soldiers who saluted the Spartan. There were a few who asked for photos when they realised who he was. John had a gut feeling that he would be swarmed by the media very soon.

"Well, I think we have a few hours to ourselves," Jane smirked, "finally, we get a bit of down time. What do we do first?"

The exhibits on the Spartan's right were ones about Ancient Europe, Ancient China and so on. But the exhibits, in fact, an entire wing on John's left, was dedicated to the Human-Covenant War, and the Discovery of the Forerunner Archives.

"You wanted to know about my history?"

"Yeah."

"Then we'll go see the exhibits on our left."

The two walked towards the sub-foyer at the left wing, their footfalls in synchronisation. Within the foyer, was a statue of John in his MJOLNIR Mark VI. It read:

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John-117

A hero is more than a person, a hero is a belief. A belief that, against impossible odds, the world can be saved—and that the world is still worth saving. Heroes inspire that belief in us. They renew our faith and give us that most precious of all gifts—hope. The world needs heroes. That's why, when a true hero arrives, the world will honour him. He is one of the few remaining Spartan-IIs, the absolute best of the best.

As they pushed on, they reached another plaque which read:

_Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
>We laughed, knowing that better men would come,_
>_And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags
>He wars on Death, for lives: not men, for flags.

_ "The Next War" —

The first exhibit was Contact Harvest. The beginning of the Human-Covenant War.

"Harvest huh" said Jane, gazing upon the peaceful farm world.

"It was where the war all began. We encountered the Covenant there."

"Covenant?"

"They're a religious conglomerate of aliens," said John, leading

Shepard across the specie profiles.

"God, the Elites, they're bigger than the Krogans."

"And in greater number too," the Spartan added. "The war lasted for three decades. They were hellbent on wiping us out."

"Didn't you attempt a diplomatic solution?" Jane asked.

"You'd be surprised what religion can do when it becomes twisted," John said, "they weren't interested in talking to us. They saw us as a blight to their Gods. They wanted us gone."

"A bit extreme. How many people did you lose?"

"We lost eight-hundred worlds, and twenty-three billion people in total."

Jane shook her head, "how'd you guys win?"

"The Elites realised that what the Prophets told them were a lie. They joined us. Helped us a lot. Most naval battles for us were slaughters. They dominated space."

"Just like how the Reapers are tearing us apart."

The two then walked further into the wing, passing by the decommissioned Scorpion tanks and the superseded Warthogs. Past the monument dedicated to Noble Team and the Fall of Reach.

"The John One-one-seven Monument," Jane read, "impressive. Looks like you're a hero. At least you had the backing of an organisation, while I had to fly solo for the most part, until the Galaxy decided to help out."

"Welcome to the club of supported heroes," John joked.

"Ass."

To Shepard, the lack of a last name suggested the notion that John was a weapon, UNSC property, not a human. She found that tragic, but understood how invaluable the creation of the Spartan programs was.

"Couldn't have done it without Cortana or my team watching my back." John said.

__The depiction of the Second Battle of New Mombasa__

Above the diorama, played a documentary about the creation of the monument, John and Shepard stopped and watched the video.

__-"__Nations have always built monuments to their heroes. Tributes to the defence against, or conquest of, other nations. But the monument here doesn't favour one nation over another. It is the first of its kind to commemorate the survival of a __species__: our species. More importantly, it commemorates the man who gave the world faith, who gave humanity a future, who made mankind believe again. Master Chief Petty Officer John One-Seventeen." __Said the Narrator, he had a

British accent and a calm demeanour to his voice, it had a soothing effect.

In the background, soft music played, it had a violin and bagpipes playing in the foreground and the soft droning of trumpets and trombones in the back.

"_So it's no surprise that the piece itself is special. Begun three years ago in 2607, the monument is a diorama built entirely by hand. It is a three-dimensional snapshot of the battlefield, and the soldiers who took to it that day. The scene has been reproduced with painstaking attention to detail and authenticity. Only the men and women who were there know it better. Today, we go behind the scenes to see its creation." _

"_To ensure historical accuracy the boot camp induction scans of every Marine involved in the battle were obtained from the United Nations Space Command records."_

Recruits had a neutral expression as the scan swept across their face. They had a look of eagerness for battle, and the desire to fight.

"_In this way the artists were able to place the right face to the right soldier. After each face is completed, it is matched to a body which has been rendered complete with uniform and body armour, then carved by hand. It was the artist's vision for this tribute to humanity, that each piece be shaped by the hand of man, without the aid of robotic model-making systems. Each handmade soldier is posed, painted, and placed on the battlefield; both the victorious, and the fallen."_

Images of maps and sceneries were shown. They were a stark contrast the ruins of New Mombasa.

"_Based on topographical maps of the day, the artists are able to replicate each hill, each plateau, and each ravine to near exact specifications. But one of the real marvels is in the cityscape itself. After the fighting had ceased, meta-archaeologists unearthed the city's building archives. In them were found perfectly-preserved blueprints of every structure in the city. But the challenge was not to merely rebuild the structures; it was to tear them down as well. Artists worked from the city plans to recreate the destruction caused by the fierce fighting: from each bullet hole, to each piece of exposed rebar."_

Even though it was just models, there was a sense of eeriness, a sense of desperation, a sense of brutality, within the sculptures.

"_Finally, our enemies were also rendered with extraordinary detail. Covenant corpses that had been recovered after the battle provided the models for these fearsome recreations. To complete the picture, authentic Covenant weapons and armour specs were accessed to fully outfit the warriors. Once the Covenant are placed opposite the Marines, a clear image begins to take shape out of the fog of history. We see how we were outnumbered, outgunned, outmatched, and seeing that we realize the importance of the monument. On that day, half a century ago, our species was pushed to the crumbling edge of extinction. And as we teetered on that precipice, staring down into

the abyss, a hand reached out, pulled us back from the brink, and gave us hope. The hand of a hero."_

After the documentary, live shorts about UNSC Marines were played. This one was shot in the very place Shepard stood. She could see that the elderly man had a well-crafted prosthetic leg.

"_Can you remember what you remember about the battle?" asked the narrator._

"_We had been fighting for a while," _answered the retired Major_, "on the seventh day we ran out of ammo, we had to scavenge all we could from the weapons that had been left behind, pistols, shotguns rounds, a handful of grenades."_

"_Do you remember where you were?"_

"_When Master Chief armed his grenade, I was on the back of an overturned Warthog firing an M41."_

"_How did you keep it together?"_

"_We knew Master Chief was still in the fight," _said the Major, his voice was hoarse and breaking because he it was such an emotional time_, "He gave us hope."_

In times of desperation, people usually looked to someone as a source of hope. There was a difference into why Shepard and the Chief were heroes. Shepard had achieved leaps and bounds as a _normal_ woman; she foresaw a great threat and rallied whoever she could. And when it all turned out to be true, Jane automatically became the spearhead in fighting the Reaper threat. Whereas John was a hero because of his long track record of successful missions and high kill count.

Jane didn't know why, but the more of the museum she saw, the more her respect and admiration for the Spartan grew. Maybe it was because he brought back humanity from the edge of extinction through nothing but his sheer will, skill, body and a shitload of bullets. He never really had to cajole or employ diplomacy " during the war that is.

She knew that he would've been involved in Insurrectionist pacification, and thus he would've used a lot of unconventional tactics to complete his objectives.

Surrounding the expansive diorama, were the first person accounts, which Shepard took the time to read.

_**-First Person Accounts-**-

**Ian Callahan **

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 10056-00254-IC _

_"The fighting was real heavy in the corridor. I'd taken a plasma shot straight to the hip to put me down. After laying in the street for God knows how long, someone finally grabbed me and started pulling me to safety. I remember yelling "thank you" over and over to whoever was tugging me out of harm's way. But then... something just didn't feel right. _

_When I looked to my left I didn't see the standard issue boots of a marine. It was some grotesquely shaped foot. That's when I started screaming. _

_Turns out two Jackals had me. I tried to resist but after a swift kick to my wounded leg, I was in too much pain to fight back. They searched through all my equipment, checking my radio for power. No dice. Without a working radio or weapon I was of little use to them. One of them pulled out his plasma pistol and aimed it right in my face. I closed my eyes and thought of home. That's when I heard two blasts from an M90. I opened my eyes and saw what was left of my captors in crumpled heaps. I never saw the marine that fired those shots. I hope he knows how grateful I am." _

**Thomas P. Porter **

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 19190-54121-TP _

_"Riding in a Scorpion Tank is literally like being in the middle of an explosion. All around you are the sounds of small-arms fire being deflected off your armour, and the head-bashing boom of the 90mm gun. All that combined with the constant grind of the tread leaves little room for anything else to penetrate your ears. It's the sound of war. I know, I listened to it for much too long." _

**Jackson Law**

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 10082â€"00055-JL _

_"We were patrolling the southern ridge in a standard Delta formation; three men to a Warthog, three hogs to a patrol. Just before the plasma round obliterated the ground in front of us, I heard our gunner yell out a warning. The next thing I knew, the hog was flipping end over end. _

_I awoke hours later, covered in dirt, about forty feet from my smouldering vehicle. No one else in my patrol survived the attack. I walked away with four cracked ribs and a broken arm." _

**Sian Wong **

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 64040-11144-SW _

_"The bridge turned out to be one hell of a crow's nest. Almost everything that stood above us had been blown to high heaven, and from my position I could pick off Covenant troops up to 1000 yards away. I must have logged around 20 kills the first few hours alone.
_

_Eventually the Covenant sent a couple of Banshees to take us out and regain the high ground. As we ran for cover, they peppered us with automatic plasma fire. I still have the burn marks up and down my right side to prove it." _

**Russel Tinnier **

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 10032-00154-RT _

_"The trenches were supposed to be a last line of defence worst-case

scenario sort of thing. We're Marines, we prepare for everything. No one thought they'd work against us. And we certainly didn't think they'd become the grave for so many of our own people. _

_"After the bridge was blown they came up the cliff in droves. My platoon was ordered to intercept, but we were out-manned and out-gunned. The bravo kilos quickly saw they could force us back into a trench and trap us like rats. That's when I saw the glow of the plasma grenades. It was all I could do to scramble up that wall. No one else even had the chance. I watched a lot of brave men die that day." _

**Thomas C. Meyer**

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 10072-00026-TM _

_"It took everything to stand on that bridge and keep shooting across its expanse. I was working with a rocket launcher and the 15 rockets I fired barely made a dent in the enemy onslaught. It quickly became apparent that the only way to slow down the Covenant offense was to blow the bridge in two. We hoped it would force their troops into the valley where we could pick them off from our elevated position.

_

_At around 1400 hours the orders came through and BOOM, down it went. We all cheered like hell at the destruction, that is until the dust settled and we were able to see that the Covenant was already pushing a wave through the valley. They didn't even give a second look to their forces who had died on that bridge, they just kept rushing forward." _

**Emmanuel Lomax**

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 66200-16524-EL _

_"I spent the night in a destroyed building, sleeping under the collapsed concrete of the eastern wall. My team was allotted a 4-hour sleep shift but when our COM units started squawking, it felt more like we had just lain down. I was still in the haze of waking up when Master Chief stepped into the rubble. _

Within two minutes every soldier in my squad was locked and loaded, ready to charge into battle behind him. We all felt stronger when he was around, like we were on the brink of winning back our world."

**Alice Winters**

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 74040-18142-AW_

"I'm a Marine Lieutenant, the usually Jarhead. My unit and I were fighting in the streets of New Mombasa. We were pinned down in a building by a platoon of Covvies, led by a Kong. I thought we were done for, but then this lone ODST attacked them from behind and wiped them out. We were all grateful for his help. Once we linked up with him, we learnt that his callsign was 'Rookie', but I can tell you this, that guy is no rookie. He led my unit away to a safer position. Along the way we encountered his squad. Their CO was Captain Veronica Dare, she seemed like a nice person, but I knew that she could rip a man in half easily; she's a Helljumper.

Anyway, during one of our breaks at a supply depot, I was told by Captain Dare that Rookie was the type of soldier who would walk into hell if you ordered him to, and come out alive unscathed. She said that on his first drop, he witnessed an event that had been censored by ONI, and he just wasn't the same since then.

Later we encountered a burned out school. And that was the first time I heard Rookie say anything besides military jargon. He muttered 'Oh god no.'

When we went inside, I knew what he meant. Rookie was slouching against the wall with his helmet off, running his hand through his hair. Captain Dare stood pale as a ghost with her hand over her mouth. And another ODS was heavying his gut out, vomiting what he had for lunch. I rounded the corner and saw what they were looking at.

Half the classroom was burned by plasma fire, the kids inside were burned, mutilated, and shredded. I knew that these people were killed quite some time earlier because the bodies were decaying. Some of the bodies had melted heads, missing limbs and cooked flesh. But as I looked closer, I saw bite marks. The Covenant had been eating these kids while they were here. And that was why Rookie was in shock, and it was also why I started to cry for the first time in my career.

Dare walked over to Rookie and picked him up, as he stood up, she ushered him out of the classroom and into the hallway, and I heard her say, 'Come on, you don't need to see this'.

Later, I found the courage to ask Dare why Rookie reacted the way he did. She said that the scene in the classroom was similar to the way he found his family."

**James Thistle **

**SERVICE NUMBER:** 23032-00173-RT _

"_I was with the 1__st__ Airborne Division, we took the worst of it in southern New Mombasa. It was brutal; our CO had been killed, recon drones destroyed, miss-drops everywhere. We had guys resorting to knives to kill the Bravo Kilos. I remember when I ran out of ammo, I was screaming with laughter when I bludgeoned a Kong to death with my shotgun._

_We used every dirty trick in the book to win the fight. We decapitated the dead covies and threw 'em at the live ones. That got some of the Grunts running, but probably got the Kongs madder. I was so grateful when the guys from the 2__nd__ Armoured turned up. The Grizzlies turned the covies to chum in seconds."_

**-Profiles****-**_

**H-133-185 (Mgalekgolo)**

**EC#**: H-133-185 _

**SPECIES**: HUNTERS (Lekgolo) _

_Due to the nature and complex biology of Hunters, very little is known about this particular specimen. On the whole, Hunters are considered extremely dangerous, and their ferociousness on the New Mombasa battlefield was no exception. _

**J-011-422 (Kig-Yar)**

_**EC#**__: J-011-422 _

_**SPECIES**__: JACKALS (Kig-Yar) _

_J-011-422 is unique among Sniper Jackals in that he was found carrying an energy shield and needler. Normally, a Jackal of this rank would abandon their shield to better handle their beam rifle, the Covenant long range sniper weapon. _

**Corporal James Dessen **

_**SERVICE NUMBER**__: 00578-48433-JD _

_Corporal James Dessen was killed in action along the northern ridge of the Battle for New Mombasa. Due to the field reports of the 77th Marine Regiment concerning the bravery of the Corporal's actions under fire, he was posthumously awarded the Red Legion of Honour.

_

**Sergeant Thomas Chang**

_**SERVICE NUMBER**__: 01866-10032-TC _

_A veteran of multiple engagements including the Battle of Installation 04, Sgt. Chang joined the New Mombasa clash fifteen hours after the mission began. As a part of second UNSC infantry wave, the Sergeant was tasked with securing a forward HQ, as well as capturing Covenant prisoners for ONI interrogation. _

_Immediately following the initial battle, Sergeant Chang was given a field promotion and ordered to the western shore of the Mombasa Quays. It was here, while on routine patrol, that Sgt. Chang was killed by Covenant air assault. _

**B-021-331 (Jiralhanae) **

_**EC#**__: B-021-331 _

_**SPECIES**__: BRUTES (Jiralhanae) _

_B-021-331 was found dead along the southern bridge span. Although his armour was relatively new, other evidence proved that the Brute was a veteran of many battles. His massive torso contained bullet scars, the blades on his spiker were dull, and one of the four digits on his left hand was missing. _

_While Brute Minors only recently began wearing heavy armour, its protection did little to save this alien from the sniper fire that killed him. _

(Note: He appears to actually be a Brute Stalker, due to the armour variation.)

**G-020-055 (Unggoy) **

_**EC#**__: G-020-055 _

_**SPECIES**__: GRUNTS (Unggoy) _

_Grunts, often considered ineffective on their own, are the basic unit of the Covenant infantry. G-020-055 is a rarity among his species in that he held a special operations designation. Grunts holding this title and wearing the tell-tale black armour are only called in for special combat situations. His presence on this battle field shows the severity and importance that the Covenant leadership was placing on this particular engagement. _

**B-010-233 (Jiralhanae)**

_**EC#**__: B-010-233 _

_**SPECIES**__: BRUTES (Jiralhanae) _

_Very little is known about B-010-233. His red headdress and gravity hammer signify a high rank in Brute wartime society, although his prowess as a soldier is debated. B-010-233 was killed by SMG fire soon after reaching the peak of this ravine. There are no UNSC killed or wounded attributed to his actions. _

**B-113-421 (Jiralhanae)**

_**EC#**__: B-113-421 _

_**SPECIES**__: BRUTES (Jiralhanae) _

_B-113-421, notable for his loud animalistic battle cries, is credited with over a dozen UNSC kills. Reports claim that marines would shake with fear when his guttural voice echoed through the valley. The Brute minor was last seen along the top of the New Mombasa ridge just moments after Master Chief's capture.

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**John-117 **

_**NAME**__: John_

_**SERVICE NUMBER**__: S-117 _

_A tenacious, driven soldier known primarily by his rank, the Master Chief is the last of the Spartan II warriors - an elite group of genetically superior, highly trained super-soldiers. _

_Though much of his wartime record is still classified, it is known that Spartan-117 participated in over 200 battles, neutralized thousands of Covenant targets, and was awarded every UNSC decoration except the Prisoner of War Medallion. _

The survival of humanity is generally credited to this man.

**B-054-846 (Jiralhanae)**

_**EC#**__: B-054-846 _

_**SPECIES**__: BRUTES (Jiralhanae) _

_B-054-846 reportedly killed 23 marines before being neutralized by Lance Corporal T. B. Chambers scoring a long-range sniper kill. ONI is currently cross-referencing this Brute Chieftain's identifiers against those recorded in previous Brute encounters. _

**Private Caio Zanato **

_**SERVICE NUMBER**__: 18221-50020-CZ _

The Battle for New Mombasa was Private Zanato's first engagement with the Covenant. An extremely capable soldier and recipient of the Basic Training Honor Graduate Ribbon, the Private was promoted to the rank of Private First Class within his first week of active duty. When asked about his hasty advancement the Private replied, "I got the job because I was the only one in my squad still alive."

Shepard gazed upon the marble floor, and realised how bad the First Contact War for the Alliance could've been. But thankfully the power ratio between the Alliance and the Turians wasn't heavily out of balanced like the UNSC and the Covenant.

Eventually, the two arrived at the exhibit of the Great Schism, where Jane learnt the truth behind the Elites defection. She found them to be an honourable race, and could only imagine the anger, guilt and torment the endured after realising they killed innocents, and served the lies of the Prophets.

She also learnt about the battle of Alpha Halo, Delta Halo, and the Ark, and their true purpose, which is wiping the galaxy clean of all life. She found it ironic that the very species the Covenant was so devoted to wipe out, was chosen to be their Gods' successors to the mantle.

"_It is mind numbing for anyone to learn that we allied ourselves with a foe that we'd been fighting for nearly three decades. But it was absolutely necessary since we now shared two common enemies, the Flood and the Covenant Loyalist. For the Top Brass, the Elites were welcomed; they would bolster our strength, numbers and equipment. With them on our side, the battlefield in space was levelled."_

Next was the Flood exhibition, there was also a warning sign about discretion as well. All the primary Flood forms had been documented, with only small holographic diagrams being projected.

"_Thanks to the information discovered in the Forerunner Archives, some of our top scientists came to the conclusion that the Flood was created by the Precursors as a failsafe, not much is known about the Precursors but it should be worth noting, that prehistoric humanity had adapted Precursor technology to become a galactic superpower."_

The Exhibition after the Flood; was the exhibition of the Forerunner-Flood War and Prehistoric humanity. Shepard contemplated found it hard to believe that humanity had progressed so far, early on in human history.

"_It is staggering to learn that Prehistoric humanity was once a galactic superpower, but the war against the Flood and the Forerunners was too much for humanity. We lost, and were devolved; we lost all our technological progress. Once we were defeated, the Forerunners had to face the threat of the Flood alone; the Forerunner-Flood War lasted for three hundred yearsâ€¦|"_

Finally, it was the exhibition of the Coalition-Covenant War, and the monument to all the fallen Spartans. Jane learnt about the desperate measures that had to be taken, how Earth was almost pushed beyond "the point of no return". John paused and gazed sadly at the names of those who were a part of Blue team. Jane placed her hand softly on John, and squeezed, showing her support.

"I miss them," he said quietly.

"I can relate."

The two then quickly toured the other exhibits where Shepard quickly learnt about World War One, World War Two, Vietnam War, First man in Space and the Apollo missions. It wasn't all that much of a shock to her, just surprising. Eventually left the museum wing, and walked out into the gardens, they picked a seat inside a gazebo, and watched the calm currents of the lake.

"Wow, so technically, the Alliance is remnants of the UNSC. Those who were left behind."

John nodded. The two sat in a comfortable silence until the Spartan's tacpad began to ping.

"Essingdon has just arrived," the Spartan said.

"Let's go."

Walking back into the main foyer, John peered outside the entrance, and saw a line of policemen holding back the crowd of reporters and paparazzi.

"Joy, the media is here," Miranda said sarcastically.

Jane walked off to talk to some of her teammates, leaving John to talk to Cortana and Halsey.

"She's cute," Cortana said in a sisterly manner.

"She is, too," Halsey concurred in a motherly tone.

John raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"I'm just saying," said the AI playfully.

"John, a quick word," Halsey beckoned, leading him to a quiet corner.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I think we're past formalities," smiled Catherine.

"Of course, mother," John joked.

Catherine laughed at his dry sense of humour, but then her expression softened. "You know I blame myself for any pain you and your friends went through. And I know you guys keep telling me I gave you a chance at life."

"I know."

"But I took away your childhood."

"And in return, you gave us, and humanity a future," John reasoned.

"I know, but it still doesn't feel right," Halsey began, "all you've ever known is war, conventional and unconventional. I want you to have a life, and be happy. I want you to live what you and your friends sacrificed so much to save. Okay?"

"Yes," John nodded, "I'll try."

â€|

"So, how are the kids doing?" Jane asked Jack.

"Jumpy as ever," the powerful biotic replied, "still researching, but guess what? They want to meet the students from the leading school here."

Shepard smiled, she knew of the culture amongst schools that had been dubbed as Progeny Schools. Where students were educated to create or continue their family legacy. Jon Grissom Academy was one of the leading educational institutions, so it was natural for students to have a prideful air around them.

"Probably the school Keyes went to," Jane said.

"Probably," Jack agreed, "the guy is like Elitist-Human Mordin."

Jane chuckled, "he's down to earth though."

Elevator doors at the edge of the foyer opened, allowing Keyes and Hood to enter. Apparently Six wasn't with them. Keyes looked very sad, prompting Liara to go over and console him. From what Jane had heard, one of Essingdon's best friend had been killed.

"Shepard," Hood greeted, "Keyes has brought me up to speed, and I will attempt to contact your superiors shortly."

"That's great, sir."

"Also, would you like us to retrofit the _Normandy_?"

"You mean, give it energy shields and energy weapons?"

Hood nodded, "of course the technology will be hardware locked to prevent our secrets from being leaked."

"Of course sir, and thank you very much."

When Shepard a low growl that sounded like laughter, she quickly turned around and saw a massive Elite approach John. His armour was sleek, powerful, and yet, had an ancient feel to it. Similar to Javik's armour. The Elite even had a black cape draped over him.

"Spartan," he said cheerfully, offering a hand.

"Arbiter," John smiled, accepting the friendly gesture.

"I knew you were too stubborn to die."

"It's been too long Vadam."

"Yes it has, but I just wanted to let you know. The Elites will be in full support of your campaign to fight this Reaper threat."

"Keyes brought you up to speed?"

"Yes, Hood had called an emergency summit, all the Fleets and Armies are mobilising right now. It will take a few days though."

"Be quick, but we can't afford any errors."

"Of course."

Hood then made some quick announcements in regards to crew accommodation, before leading John back into the media spotlight. Over the years, the Spartan had grown accustomed to being bombarded by questions from reporters. He didn't mind the media, but he wasn't a big fan of the media hounding him. The attention aimed towards him seemed a bit too excessive.

The Spartan was proud of many of his achievements, and appreciated the "thanks" that were given to him. But what he didn't like was when things went overboard. He preferred a quiet "thank-you" as opposed to a public ceremony.

As John exited the Museum, he made sure his tie was straight, and placed his hat on. Pretty soon, the cameras began flashing and the questions started flying. _Here we go again_.

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"_Brutes? Well, you'd be surprised. The Coalition-Covenant War isn't as clear cut as everybody likes to think. They were fighting on both sides. Sadly though, all those chaps on our side died. History will remember us as heroes for wiping out a violent race, but they won't remember the Brutes that fought for us, those who no longer believed in the Prophets. Sure some of them were hired help, but there were others who helped us because they wanted too. History will remember us as wiping out a violent species. We committed genocide, and the younger generations will see us as heroes. Does this really make us better than our enemies? I don't think so."_

-LTCOL Dr Essingdon Keyes, talking to Operations Manager Edmund Flint

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Whew, it's done. This chapter took.****

****These Literary "vigilantes" are spreading like wild fire! And one of them, are absolutely shameless, well at least they have the decency to be honest, I'll give them that.**

>Whatever happened to objectivity in constructive criticism? Why is it replaced by subjectivity?

****In any case, I've created a group to counter this problem.****

Joyous Exultations**** is aimed at praising the artistic flare and creativity of stories and authors, and helping aspiring writers.****

forum/Joyous_Exultations/117189/

****Also, some of you may know what Steve Downes said recently about the Chiefâ€| those of you who don't, look into it. Here's a hint, a hero's death. ****

â€|

****As always, please review. And here's another question; any parents out there reading this?****

22. Traitor Within

****A/N: This story is subjected to changeâ€| (when Halo 4/5/6 come out, that is). Also, this will be a short chapter to merge a couple of things together.****

â€|

****Now it has been brought to my attention, that some readers may have difficulty in keeping track of the plot. So from now on, I will put a short the-story-so-far at the beginning of every chapter from now on.****

****So, currently:**

>Coalition discovers and reverse-engineer Forerunner technology, and begin over-hauling military in preparation of defence against a Covenant offensive â€" Covenant attacks, initiating a Coalition-Covenant War. (This means that civilians aren't _upgraded**_** yet).****

****Outcomes Coalition-Covenant War;**

**>Pyrrhic victory for the Coalition, many known worlds written off as uninhabitable.
During the evacuation of Earth, the Chief and an unknown number of humans are left behind.****

****Coalition factions that make it to the Ark and recall all Halo Rings as a contingency plan against any remaining Covenant forces or unknown hostiles, all Flood specimens on the facilities are either purged or quarantined for study.**

**>Coalition population is amalgamated with cybnertics for eternal life. (Positronic brain incompatible with Hunter, Elite and Grunt physiology).
Human population is approximately Two billion upon**

arrival at the Ark.

>Elite population at One billion.
Hunter population is at 500 million colonies.

>Grunts have been placed into a controlled breeding program, (population is far easier to manage since basic cybnertics suppress their urges).
Coalition colonised surrounding Globular clusters and Forerunner Artificial worlds.**

**Total collapse of the Covenant.

>Brutes are now endangered
Jackals are trading partners of human Insurrectionists.

>Prophets have entered self-imposed exile and are most likely extinct.

The Chief has been placed in cryogenics after the Hammer-Down protocol. He is awakened by Commander Jane Shepard of the Alliance. She offers him a position on her team. (Events of ME2 after Horizon takes place).

Shepard is then incarcerated after handing herself over to the Alliance. Reapers then begin their assault on Earth.

Coalition initiates Operation Homecoming; reconnaissance of former colonies and assess habitability. UNSC **_Watchful Eye**_** crashlands on Earth after a high atmospheric collision with Reaper forces. UNSC existence is finally revealed to Alliance soldiers, the two human factions organised a defence against the Reapers. However the **_**Watchful Eye**_** is destroyed in a major offensive. Vancouver is written off as destroyed due to the on board nuclear warheads that were unwittingly detonated by the Reapers.**

The **_Normandy**_** links up with UNSC **_**Elysium Sun**_**, after picking up Javik. Both ships have returned to Coalition held space (the Ark). The crew quickly learns about the history of the UNSC after a visit to the Museum of Humanity**

â€|

So from now on, the plot summaries will be shorter.

XXxxXX

"_The Shortsword MkII, has been converted into a space-faring and atmospheric bird, to deliver light to heavy payloads on enemy targets. These targets can range from enemy ships to armoured convoys."_

-UNSC Shortsword Report

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EARTH, VANCOUVER

Lotus hefted his Sabre-LMG, scanning across the desolate ruins of the city. He eyed his Geiger counter, and learnt that the level of radiation was moderate. The Operative had expected a higher level, but the number of fusion warheads on the _Watchful Eye_, outnumbered the fission warheads.

"You still think the Reapers are dead, killed by the radiation?" he asked, shaking the gun to remove the ashes caked on it.

"Maybe," said Arca, "I hate those things. Bloody electrical blast drains shields."

"Not by much," Greystone interjected, "our gear's EMP hardened and insulated."

"Still, I'd prefer not to rip them a part with my hands," Fifth Element's leader said.

"Say what you want," said Lotus, "But it's kinda fun, fighting those things with a tomahawk."

"You need to see a shrink," Greystone muttered.

"Better than fighting the Flood, remember that op?"

Greystone and Arca cringed, remembering that horrific mission. During the early days of the Coalitions at the Ark, a group of Insurrectionists had somehow managed to get their hands onto a few dozen Flood spores, and unleashed it onto Seaside, a planet in an Open Star Cluster. The three had to slaughter so many, to buy enough time for the containment teams to arrive. Memories of disfigured humans of all ages and size, were still fresh, and would probably remain that way for all time.

"I hated that op," Greystone spat, sweeping his surroundings with the Ember rifle.

A low growl rumbled across the ruins, causing the team to turn around and pointed their weapons at the source. Reaper Brutes emerged, tossing aside crashed vehicles. Husks, Marauders and Cannibals followed in closely behind.

"Ah shit," Lotus swore, "how the fuck did they see us?"

"The ash," Arca concluded, "Brian, take the one on the left. Bright, hit the one on the right, and I'll take the centre one."

Training kicked back in, active camo was deactivated and green acknowledgement lights flicked on. In an instant, the team dove for cover, as crimson rounds zipped past over their heads. Lotus managed to cut down a few cannibals before being forced to retreat, as one of the Brutes smashed through his cover.

Arca instantly spun around, and hosed the massive amalgamation with heavy hyper-velocity slugs. He emptied the 30 round magazine into the Brute's head, shredding the appendage off cleanly. Not bothering to reload, the Operative switched to his sidearm, and set it to automatic. The pistol coughed and buckled in its hands as it sent .45 AP rounds down range, ripping husks apart.

Being rushed by a Brute, Greystone quickly rolled off to his left, and unsheathed his M102 Plasma Longsword. The blade hissed and crackled to life, wisps of ionised air curled up from the sword, trailing its wake. Roaring with insurmountable aggression, the Brute halted, and charged the Operative again. But this time, Greystone was ready. The blade bounced lightly in his hands as he waited for the

Brute.

"C'mon asshole," he taunted.

Greystone launched himself into the air, as the Brute stormed past beneath him. He stuck his blade down, scything through the Reaper unit's head and chest. The creature came to a jarring halt, losing all of its moment. Its flesh sizzled and popped from the heat, filling the air with a foul stench.

Arca peered out of cover, activating his Achilles pack. The remaining missile shot forward, tore through a husk and a Cannibal, before embedding itself into a Brute. The creature roared in defiance before being torn apart, while its comrades were consumed in a fireball.

"I'm out for the Achilles," Arca said, switching to an M93F Shotgun, the weapon snapped and clicked as it formed itself in his grip, winking red the shotgun's safeties were turned off. The previous user of the weapon had been kind enough to load the magazines with needler buckshots.

At the squeeze of a trigger, dozens of shards poured of the barrel and found their mark in the Reaper hordes. Empty shells arced and clattered onto the road. Cannibals and husks stumbled alike as they were impaled, before being ripped to bloodied shreds from the inside. Another Brute attempted to rush Arca. The Operative emptied the remaining clip into the behemoth's chest, and was rewarded with a brilliant golden explosion, and a shower of gore.

Fifth Element was eventually channelled through the suburbs by the remnants of the Reaper forces. Alarms droned in their helmets as they shields were drained rapidly.

"These fuckers are smart," Greystone grunted.

"They're not brainless, genius," Lotus said.

Arca gazed at the navpoint whilst surveying his surroundings. The blue tag hovered over a distant hill, which was in direct visual range. Increasing his optic's magnification, he could see the Atlas's and Makos lined up along the ridge line.

"Fhajad," he keyed in.

"Here, how are you guys holding?" the Spartan-II asked.

"We've got a visual on you, and could use some fire support."

There was a small pause from Fhajad's end. "Okay, we see you. Damn, you've got company."

"Cut them down!" Arca urged, firing his weapon at a Marauder.

"Copy, shells on the way."

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****THE ARK, UNSC HIGHCOM****

Keyes sat in a conference room, with Dare, Hood, Halsey and Greenfield. The oak table glistened under the soft light, as the files were spread across the surface. All of them had known Edmund Flint personally at some point. For Keyes, Flint had been one of his lifelong friends. The two had attended Exemplar Grammar (All-boys) Academy, since pre-kindergarten together. Edmund's name would no doubt be added to the school's war memorial.

But for Anna Greenfield, she seemed to be taking Edmund's death the hardest. Dare did her best to comfort her, only sheer self-discipline was stopping Anna from bawling her eyes out.

"We know the attack on Northfold was not an Insurrectionist attack," said Hood.

"Attack was precise and they had back-ups," Veronica commented.

Anna brought up the facilities' diagram. "Scans show that the explosives were precision placed to cause total collapse on my floor. Elevator shafts were blown, back-up generators destroyed. I had some guys from D-group to try and get some security footage. They came up with nothing. Offsite data storage had been corrupted."

"Collateral damages?" Hood asked.

"Information relating to non-critical programs, COIN and CT operation reports and various internal affairs, nothing valuable."

"Well, someone is targeting you," said Keyes, "your team must've found something."

Anna paused for a moment. "A few days back, Edmund and I found manifests for refined resources being shipped to an unknown location. Normally we don't bother with this kind of thing, and forward it to either CBI or Section One€|"

"But," Halsey inquired.

"But, the ship involved is a Prowler, UNSC _Nightwalker_. We dug a bit more, and uncovered the involvement of Sixth Element, from ONISAD."

"Yes, there deployment was censored," Hood said, recalling the email. "We may have a rogue cell on our hands."

"Do you think it could be Parangosky?" Halsey suggested, "She's the only person besides Hood who has the authority to cover ONISAD operations."

"Maybe, but we can't jump to conclusions," said Hood, "if she is dirty, then we can't go after her yet. She'll clean house, and we'll lose all leads. Right now, I'm committing resources to combat the Reapers."

"Section Zero personnel are relocating right now," said Anna, "we're in no shape to do a scan of anyone."

"When you guys are able," said Essingdon, "run some simulations to find a motive. Then we can get other ONISAD teams to investigate."

"What if they're dirty?" Dare asked.

"They can't be," said Halsey, "most of them went to Exemplar, Noble, Royal or Corbulo. And they've been conditioned. If they're doing something wrong, then they're being manipulated."

"ONISAD could've carried out the attack," Dare suggested.

"Doubtful," said Hood, "ONISAD have always been in small numbers. We have thirty-six Combat Operatives, and one-hundred watchers. Attack would've been outsourced to another group. Insurrectionist sympathisers, possibly."

"Okay, so what do we do about Parangosky?" Dare asked.

"Nothing," Hood answered, "we need to be sure it is her, before we do anything."

Essingdon wasn't too pleased with the situation. He had a gut feeling that Parangosky was dirty. But like Hood said, without any solid evidence or resources, they couldn't bring her in. Not yet anyway.

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****THE ARK, NEW YORKSHIRE SECTOR****

Hood had been kind enough to let everybody have a little bit of shore leave as military preparations went underway. John was out visiting the remaining Spartan-IIs, while most of the _Normandy_'s passengers were spending the day at a country club, with a few UNSC personnel.

News had certainly travelled fast, and so many of the press were trying to get an interview with Shepard. But thankfully, Hood had placed a request in to the NYSDP to keep the media off their backs.

Jane didn't mind small interviews, so long as it remained neutral and objective everything was fine and dandy. But the moment the reporters start to skewer or exaggerate facts, is when she would release her verbal arsenal and absolutely destroy the reporter's credibility. In some small part of her, she loved breaking subjective journalism.

"It's amazing how this place makes the Citadel look like just any other space station," Garrus said, "kind of â€"as you humans say it-boggles my head, that they can easily prepare dextro-amino foods for me. And in good quality too."

He was enjoying what appeared to be the turian equivalent of French fries. The crisp batter crackled and crunched as Garrus tucked into the delicacy.

"So, how'd Javik handle the museum?"

"Well, better than I thought. He actually seemed proud of the Coalition. And was happy that the UEG and UNSC High Command didn't

bother him."

"Well, they've got profiles on his species," Jane said.

"Yeah, that came as a bit of a shock to all of us. But, walking onto a massive installation, I half expected for something like this."

"So where is Javik actually?" Shepard asked.

"He's with Vega," Garrus said, almost snickering.

"What are they doing?" Jane asked in a maternal tone.

"Vega's teaching Javik to play golf," the Turian cackled.

"Golf? Serious?"

Garrus nodded.

Another Turian, clad in what would be appropriate diplomatic attire, soon arrived, and eased himself into an empty chair.

"Primarch Victus," Shepard greeted, setting down her drink.

"Commander, Vakarian. My apologies for not being able to join you earlier, but the reports from Palaven are unnerving, to say the least."

"How bad?" Garrus asked.

"It's a number in the millions, they're using our own tactics against us," Victus answered grimly. "The strategists in me, admire their brutality, the turian in me knows that I'm watching the destruction of our civilisation."

"That's not war," Shepard said, referring to casualty count. "That's slaughter."

"We've never faced a force like this before," Victus said, shaking his head.

"Primarch, I have to ask," said Jane, "when the time comes, can you lend us your fleets to retake Earth?"

Victus pondered for a moment. The Coalition seemed far more capable of taking on the Reapers than the entire galaxy combined. But he did remember what Keyes had said. _"We can win, but it will be a damn long war."_

"If the krogan joins our fight, you have my word that the Turian Fleet will stand at your side."

Shepard frowned slightly. To say there was a bit of bad blood between the krogan and the salarians was an extreme understatement.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you Commander."

Not too far away on the balcony, were Miranda Keyes, and Liara T'Soni, going half on a large bowl of chips and gravy.

"Miranda, if you don't mind me asking, what was the Human-Covenant War like? Personally, I mean," Liara asked.

"Tiring," Keyes said, as if it were yesterday. "I just woke up, so it still feels fresh. We could feel the war was going to end, we just didn't know how. But after thirty years, we knew it was going to end soon."

"Our war with the Reapers," T'Soni began, "it just seems like lambs against wolves. One Reaper was bad enough, thousands or even millions, is worse."

"I'm sure everyone is doing everything they can."

Liara scoffed, "you would be surprised. Even your brother insulted the galactic government's incompetence."

"That bad?"

"The Reapers don't even have to fight, they just need to show up, and they'll win."

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****EARTH, VANCOUVER****

"Goddamn!" Lotus roared. "Fuck that was close."

Fiery streaks filled the darkened sky, and slammed into the ground in front of the ONISAD team. Powerful tremors and the seething heat could be felt. Lotus barely caught the outline of two Brute before they were engulfed by a fireball.

An Osprey then touched down nearby, ODSTs thundered down the ramp to cover the team's extraction, before retreating.

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"_The A-50 Bloodhound ground-attack fighter, there to back you up when things on the ground become nasty."_

Air Chief Marshal Andrew Hoskins

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** You know what I hate about Bourne, Assassin Creed and Halo/ME-Xover stories? The Pseudo-realism in many of the stories "increase" my standards and expectations. Thus many of the stories I used to enjoy, I now cringe when I read themâ€¦ I feel robbed. D'='

>And to make matters worse, the Pseudo-realistic stories are on hiatus.

****Anyway, next update may take a while as I will be trying to weave in the Leviathan DLC.****

****Concept for Quarian-Geth conflict has been laid out.****

****Priority Sur'Kresh and Tuchanka missions will be introduced later. I'm rearranging things to suit the plot comfortably.****

23. Upgrades

****A/N: Here's a stupid questionâ€| how many guys are reading this? XD****

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"_The M98A1 Javelin is a highly mobile artillery platform that is capable of performing rapid bombardment on enemy positions. The mathematical formula used in its firing sequence, allows the Javelin to have a fire output equivalent to that of a static artillery battery. Munitions fired can range from solid DU shells for bunker busting, to APAM rounds or Thermobaric charges."_

-UNSC M98A1 Javelin Report

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****EARTH, VANCOUVER â€" OUTSKIRTS, CANADA****

Monsoon rains had begun to beat down on the weary people, washing away the grime from the battered vehicles. Anthony and Brian had found a small elevated position to watch over the resting convoy. Water cascaded down the shelter they created, keeping them dry. Anthony's fountain pen bore across the pages of his journal as he wrote his personal thoughts down. Hearing the squelches of footfalls, Anthony tore his eyes away from the old book and looked up.

"Whatcha doin'?" Bright asked, cradling a plastic box as he moved under the shelter.

"Journal."

"Gay."

Anthony looked at Bright with a condescending expression.

"No one does that man," Bright said, justifying his view.

"I do," Anthony reasoned, "it's something I leave for my family."

Family, Anthony was very close with his family before being recruited into ONISAD. Overtime he became distant from his older sister, Emily; and younger brother, Ryan. After the death of their parents, Emily and Ryan blamed Anthony for not being around enough, for letting his parents die, thinking that he no longer loved his family. Anthony had remained passive and silent, seemingly confirming his siblings' suspicions. But in reality, he was devastated, and the words of Emily and Ryan hurt him deeply. Anthony soon came to realise that his siblings no longer wanted him to be in their lives. He accepted it, and left them alone.

Being an ONISAD Paramilitary Operative demanded everything. Private

life became nearly non-existent. And retirement was like a death sentence. No one leaves the clandestine world, it is impossible to put it all behind. It will always haunt those who have bathed in its darkness.

The journals Anthony wrote were meant for those who once were close to him, so that they may understand what he had to endure. And maybe, just maybe, repair the relations that had broken so long ago.

He flicked back through the pages, lined with his neat small writing. The entries were usually separated by prolonged periods of time. Anthony had been careful not to put in anything classified.

"How many journals do you have?"

"I started having journals since I joined ONI that makes five volumes."

"Hey, is this Delilah Orton?" Bright smirked, picking up a photo out of the journal.

She had shoulder length auburn hair, flawless glowing skin and warm brown eyes. She had a vibrant smile that seemed to have a calming and reassuring effect. Delilah had been a childhood friend of Anthony, the two still retained some form of contact with one another.

"Yes."

"She's cute," said Bright.

"Break my sister's heart, and die," Brian said.

"Hey," Bright raised his hands, "it's not like I'm going to go after herâ€ she's too fast for me."

Anthony rubbed his temple, "don't remind me about that."

"It was a marathon I believe, a uni marathon to be exact. Naturally, you were in the lead and it looked like you were going to win. Butâ€ right on your heel was Delilah."

Anthony shook his head.

"I do believe that you two were neck and neck when you were fifty metres out from the finishing line," Bright continued, "you both _tripped_ â€" though it seemed you were trying to get some face time â€" you hit the ground first, she landed on top of you."

"You were pretty dazed too," Brian interjected, "Ms Orton was absolutely fine on the otherhand."

"In the words of Donnie, who was standing in the sidelines," Bright said, "you two both locked gaze."

"It was only a second," Anthony protested.

"I think I'll take the words of those who weren't hormonally, and emotionally compromised at the time, thank you," Bright said in a mock professional manner, "Donnie said that you two locked gaze for

five seconds."

"Oh god," Anthony sighed.

"Then, with all the grace, beauty and elegance which she had at her disposal â€" which was quite a lot â€" bet down, and kissed you gently on the cheek, before darting off towards the finish."

Brian and Bright began to laugh. "You always came first in marathons, but seeing you being taken to second, like this?" Bright exasperated, "priceless!"

"Delilah has encountered a level seventy assassin," Brian said in a deep mock host voice.

"She uses kiss," Bright continued, "it is super effective!"

"Level seventy assassin is incapacitated," Anthony said, "yeah, that joke's old."

"But still in the top one-hundred most viewed viral videos on the internet," Brian added. "You should read the comments sometime."

"I'll pass," Anthony furrowed his eyebrows.

"Anyway, got you guys some food," Bright said, opening the container and handed out a couple of MRE packs.

"Thanks," Anthony said as he was handed a ham and salami linguini pack. He opened a side lot, poured in some water, and waited for the exothermic reaction to take place.

The contents of the pack grew warm, the temperature rose to satisfactory levels, prompting the operatives to begin eating.

"So what's the plan?" Bright asked.

"Get the civvies out of here," Anthony said, "then just wait it out."

"Shit just gets higher, doesn't it?" Brian sighed.

UNSC Forces operational strength had been severely diminished, due to high casualties.

"I heard that Anderson wants to move towards Europe, something big is happening there."

â€|

Anderson sat in the refuge of a Mako tank; his armour was battered, and covered in blood and gore. It was all a goddamn mess, even with the help of the UNSC forces; they still lost a lot of good people. He gazed out at the heavy rain, and couldn't help but think about all those who had been killed in Vancouver. To be harvested by Reapers, or to be ripped apart, down to the molecular level, David struggled to accept that the nuclear explosions were somewhat of a mercy killing.

He may thrive in the military, where everything was so clean cut to him, but he hated war. He hated how he had to face young children, and having to give them false hope that their parents will return for them.

David looked towards the Intelligence Officers, they seemed jovial. But he knew, deep down, they were haunted by their past, tormented by their deeds. As an N7, he knew the black ops world all too well. Sure, things were still clean cut from where he stood, but for Intelligence, it was a whole different world. Their need-to-know basis is far greater than that of an average grunt. People say they see the world in grey. They say they see the world in colour.

Anderson looked back at his journal; he had Kahlee on the front page. _Maybe when this war's over, _he thought, brushing over the parchment with his calloused hands.

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****THE ARK, FORT WESTER****

Entering the fort, John gazed around the expansive military facility. Neatly trimmed hedges and trees adorned the light-grey angular buildings, and the closely cropped grass surrounded the colourful flowerbeds. _There's something you don't see every day_, John thought as he pulled the warthog into a parking sport.

He eased himself out of the vehicle, and looked around the base, there was something familiar about it, it reminded him of Reach.

"John!" Maria cried happily, pulling the Spartan into a crushing hug.

"Maria," the Chief smiled, returning the gesture, "How are you?"

"Great!" His old friend beamed, "got a family now."

She had grown her hair out a bit longer, her black locks were touching her shoulders, and there was that warm maternal air around her.

"Wish we could've attended your wedding."

Maria nodded sadly, "sorry about Blue."

"It's fine," John said.

"I'll take your word for it," though it was clear that Maria didn't accept John's answer, "anyway, come and meet what's left of us."

Leading the Legendary Spartan into the barracks, Maria noticed how _human_ her friend was. John was amongst the more emotionally resilient Spartans; it was why he could handle the pressure of command and succeed against overwhelming odds. But this also meant he was _less_ affected by human emotions, thus making him seem cold and detached.

Yet here he was, wearing grey UNSC fatigues, with the sleeves rolled up to just under his elbows. During the time Maria had fought alongside John, he had never really added any flair to his attire. He usually kept things in default or whatever was most efficient.

"Oh, I forgot to mention, Arby said he's hosting a welcome back party," Maria said.

"A party?" John frowned. Fanfare was never really the Spartan's type of thing. Sure it's nice to be appreciated for outstanding service, but a party was just too much.

"Don't worry, it's not a formal event or anything," Maria reassured, "we all know how much you hate being smothered."

John eased open the glass door, allowing his old friend to enter the oak themed foyer.

"I don't think people should be honoured for doing what is expected, just appreciated."

"Put it this way, it's a ceremony of appreciation for doing what is expected, and going beyond the call to save our asses," Maria chuckled.

"Well, you guys helped a lot."

"Nah, it was just mostly you," Maria grinned, she enjoyed making this once stoic person feel uncomfortable.

John shook his head lightly. "You're almost as bad as Kelly."

Referring to the fallen, and bringing back fond memories about them, were the Spartans' way of honouring them. Although it was somewhat painful to talk about his oldest friend, it did certainly help him move on.

"Almost, but not quite," Maria said.

"So, are you back with us?"

"Not quite," Maria shook her head, "you know during the war, I was on the ground with you, but now, I'm just helping RnD."

Upon entering a common room, John was greeted by the site of aesthetically pleasing design, and the remaining Spartan-IIs.

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****THE ARK, UNSC HIGHCOM****

With public relations having their hands full due to recent events, many of the UEG's population were in full support of returning to Earth. Naturally, the Elites felt that it was their duty to rally whatever they could muster, and join their human allies.

Hood leaned on his oak wood desk, and scrolled across the monitors as

Fleet reports and battle estimations flooded through. His recent talk to Admiral Steven Hackett and Admiral David Anderson (via the _Normandy's_ quantum entanglement communications), had allow him to acquire enough data for combat estimates.

ONI hypothesised that Coalition naval tactics and weapons would turn the tide for the galactic defenders, however, should the war grind to attrition, chances of a defeat would be very high. This had prompted the UEG to raise military readiness to DEFCON 1.

Hood had already devised combat tactics to minimise casualties and exposure to enemy fire. Since each UNSC Fleet would have a contingent of stealth combat units, they would be the vanguard, weakening the enemy with precision attacks, thus allowing the main Fleet to swat the remnants aside.

"Excuse me sir," said Hood's secretary over the intercom.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Doctor Essingdon Keyes and Doctor Halsey are here to meet you sir."

"Send them through."

"Yes, sir."

A soft pulse pinged from the doors.

"Come in," Hood said over the intercom.

The glass doors de-polarised and parted open, allowing the UNSC's bests minds to enter. Keyes was wearing his Ceremonial Dress uniform, while Halsey wore a grey pencil suit and a labcoat.

"Please, have a seat."

Halsey smiled, and eased herself into the cream armchair, and straightened her skirt. Her son, sat in the adjacent chair, and retrieved a couple of _paper_ folders out of his briefcase.

"What can I do for you?" Hood asked.

"I propose, we enhance Commander Jane Shepard with Spartan-four augmentations," Keyes said, straight to the point.

Having known Keyes for years, Hood trusted the scientist's judgement, and decided to wait, and let him elaborate.

"Go on."

"Field tests have shown that our Positronic brain lattice implants, heavily disrupts biotic attacks. However Commander Shepard is a biotic, and I have reason to believe that if we enhance her physical and mental capabilities, her abilities will increase dramatically."

Terrence had seen some of the combat footage the Keyes had given him. Shepard's biotics was well beyond impressive. The Forerunners had documented biotic abilities, and how it clashed with Positronic

lattices. In the end, the majestic race opted for technological leaps, because the need for military might had waned.

"There is the issue of sensitive information leaks," Hood pondered. "The Chief made it clear in his report that the leaders of the galaxy areâ€¦|_incompetent_ and _envious_ for lack of better terms."

"Unlikely," said Halsey, "Hackett stated that the Alliance Parliament is gone, and its economy in disarray. In all likelihood, the Alliance will merge with us. The Council will be none the wiser about our military capabilities."

"A fair point," Hood concurred, "I'll green light it. All Shepard has to do now is accept our offer."

"Of course sir," Keyes nodded, showing his appreciation, "and, any update on the _Normandy_?"

"Give me a moment," the Admiral said, turning to his console.

Because of his preferences, Hood decided to utilise his keyboard and mouse, instead of the Positronic interface. He brought up the retrofits reports, and projected them for the whole room to see. A hatch opened at the top of the room, and extended the holoprojector. A high-definition projection of the _Normandy_ appeared, showing annotations of the ship's latest upgrades.

"I took John's word for this," Hood began, "so I authorised every possible upgrade to be made."

Keyes and Halsey scrolled through the details of the ship. The Tantalus drive core was replaced by a hybrid Plasma-Fusion Cell. Dual energy shields were installed, alongside with countermeasures and point defence turrets. The hull was replaced by the L7 Composite Armour. Superstructure had been enhanced, ship design more aero-dynamic design and the interior cleaned up. Offensive armaments consisted of a Main Rail/Hard-light Ion Canon (RHALIC) hybrid similar to that of UNSC ships, and Plasma Turrets. The _Normandy_ was also outfitted with a Slipstream Space Drive and reverse-engineered stealth systems.

"She can finally pack a punch now," Keyes said, referring to the freighter, "how'd the brass handle it?"

Hood gave a light chuckle, "some took it pretty well, and others wereâ€¦|_annoyed_. They weren't too happy about having _tech_ leaks."

"But we had our people install hardware locks," Halsey chimed in.

"Yes," Hood nodded, "hardware locks should keep everyone but us out."

"I've also made sure that necessary upgrades were made," Catherine continued, straightening out her skirt, "I've had my people give them everything that doesn't give them an advantage over us, should they turn on us."

Hood nodded in approval of Halsey's wit.

"When we head back sir, do you want me and the Chief to stay on the _Normandy_ and keep an eye on things?" Essingdon asked.

"Yes, keep the tech safe, and keeps us in the loop."

"Yes sir."

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****THE ARK, NEW MANHATTAN, WELTON DIPLOMATIC FACILITY****

Jane quickly glanced into the mirror as she pulled on a white blouse, as she buttoned up her shirt; she brushed the small scar that ran just below her chest. Civilian clothing, something she hadn't worn in a while. Getting a few days to just wear jeans and a shirt made her feel normal, eased the burden of the galaxy on her shoulders. Her time on The Ark had made her feel at peace, gave her solitude from her world.

The doorbell chimed, distracting Shepard from her thoughts.

"Who is it? She asked.

"It's me and Essngdon," said Liara.

"Coming."

Rolling up her sleeves, Jane pressed the key pad, unlocking the door. She heard the doorknob twist, followed by the footfalls of Keyes and T'Soni.

"My, you look dashing," the Asari complimented.

Shepard chuckled, "knock it off."

"Well, it's not every day we get to see the great Commander Shepard wearing casual clothes," Liara joked.

A small smile spread across Essingdon's lips as he watched the playful banter.

"So, can I ask why you guys are here?" Shepard asked.

"I want to pass you an idea, you can turn it down if you want," Keyes said.

"Go on," Shepard said, sitting down on her bed.

Essingdon and Liara eased themselves onto a couch, but something was peculiar about their body language. Jane noticed that the Asari was sitting at a _possessive _angle towards Keyes. Normally, the unknowing eye would miss this gesture completely, but Jane had known Liara long enough to understand all of her body language.

"Well," Essingdon continued, "this project has been green lighted by Hood, so it all comes down to you now. I was wondering if you would like to receive augmentations."

"Like Spartans?"

"Yes, specifically Fours, like me."

Jane's gazed towards the floor, and pondered with the idea. Being faster, stronger and smarter would give her an edge on the battlefield. But she wondered if there would be any strings attached. Her previous experiences with covert organisations offering to help her hadn't been the greatest.

"If you're wondering, there's no strings attached," Keyes reassured, "I give you my word as a doctor."

Shepard pondered the prospects of becoming a Spartan. Like Essingdon said, "no strings attached," they were just going to enhance her, and let her run wild. It almost sounded too good to be true.

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"_Unmanned Drones have always been at the apex of the fight against Insurrectionism and Terrorism. The Unmanned Combat Adaptive Drone 7 is the latest generation of Drones, capable of being outfitted with any modules to complete the task at hand. UCAD7-Light's main role is reconnaissance and neutralisation of enemy sentries. The Medium series is combat support in urban environments, and the disarming of explosives. The Heavy series are used for frontal assaults, and provide protection against small arms. Unlike the Sentinels, all UCADs are remotely operated, whether by neural interface from field operators or superluminal consoles from orbiting ships and command posts."_

-UNSC UCAD-7 Report

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****To [Anon] Guest****

****Why are there so many ME/Halo crossover where the universes the same, you ask? Well, it all began when I joined the realm of ME/Halo. I've read many Crossovers, but they were quite bland and felt recycled. Sure you had your good ones, (they had more detail) but even then it was extremely rare to find originality in a terribly overused plot device. (Came across ****_**In the Shadow of Gods**_**** â€" loved it. But that's another story). So I thought, "Hey, why not combine the two universes together and see what happens?"****

****Then I read ****_**The Last Spartan**_****, I enjoyed the story, but couldn't help but feel slightly disgruntled by the technology tree displayed in the story.****

****So, I wrote ****_**Humanity's Legacy**_****, which bore elements from ****_**Freedom Guard's ****_**plot devices. [Thanks ol'pal]. However, I realised there was a lack of characterisation and development, so I began writing ****_**Lost Legacy**_****. I wrote this story after gaining a far stronger background in the ME universe and updating myself on Halo lore. The main aim of ****_**Lost Legacy**_****, was to bring humanity into the Chief, while balancing out the universes (attention wise) and bringing scientific calculations into play, so to not have******

the Halo universe be obscenely overpowered (something that I see too much today). Not to mention, make it as much as original as possible.**

Take note of the publication dates. During the time when I posted my stories, the majority of ME/Halo crossovers, starred the Chief and Cortana, who were picked up by Shepard after stumbling across the **_Forward Unto Dawn**_**. A few months later, I don't know what happened or why, but immediately, the number of Same Universe stories began to crop up exponentially, and most of them didn't necessarily star the Chief or even Shepard for that matter (go figure).**

So, I'm assuming they're appropriations of some kind. My answer to why there are so many Same Universe stoires, is appropriation. Writers see a new idea being introduced, and decide to capitalise on it.

To LK

GASP AND RECOIL IN HORROR

I'll forgive you for calling the Easy-to-induce-bronchial-stims as "harmless space tobacco". But dissing Strawberry and calling it un-manly? Now that crosses the line. You don'tâ€| EVER... badmouth strawberries. Strawberry is where it's at.

And pink onesie pjs in a Barbie house? That seems oxymoronic. I don't think Barbie does a cross of baby-cute and graceful-elegance. (Judge me if you wish).

But I digressâ€| real men aren't afraid to (as you put it), smoke harmless strawberry flavoured space tobacco while rocking back and forth in a Barbie house, wearing pink onesies.

To SpartanDog1

It's okay, I'm not going to let that happen.

To Sevenar

Thanks for the massive amount of reviews, but I can't help but feel that you were skim reading through a large portion of the story. You've missed some key details.

24. Welcome to the Program

A/N: I'm going to be rapid firing chapters for the next two weeks.

Need to be clear on something here. The Coalition's fighting preference is hybrid of precision attacks followed by shock and awe. Their armed forces are very low in number.

The Reapers on the other hand, have had millions of years to accumulate in number. They can play "Zerg-rush" and have a devastating effect.

In any case, I insinuated Pyrrhic victory.

â€|

****Another thingâ€| everyone remembers how fast the Stage 1 augmentation process of the Spartan-IIIs were right?****

â€|

****To Dood****

****I'm totally aware of what I'm doing. S4s are adult volunteers; I've already addressed the issue of them not being as fast and strong as the S3s or S2s.****

****Also, S2s are conditioned, not indoctrinated. Being indoctrinated literally strips a person of their higher cognitive abilities. S2s were created for clandestine operations, which are meant to be carried out by intelligent operatives.****

****And with the little segment of yours at the end, I need to correct you on one thing. Those who have strong morals and ethics will value the lives of others more than their own. I'll give you an example, in a situation where only one person can live, would you kill your best friend? Or give your life to save him/her?****

****But I find your statement slightly oxymoronic. Like you said, humanity is varied, would that not be the case in every scenario then? You'll always have people who will react differently, no matter what. Humanity can be shaped into anything. It is morals and ethics that define us, not religion alone.****

****(Not to sure why you had to put this little statement of yours in, but I felt the need to address it).****

â€|

****In regards to the last questionâ€| inside joke****

â€|

****And just a quick note, I write dreams in first person, makes it more personal and riveting.****

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"_Shepard? Stealth? You're kidding?"_

-Kasumi Goto

"_No, it's true! Before she got a command of her own, she was an N-Seven Fury and Shadow Infiltrator."_

-Jeff "Joker" Moreau

"_I don't think so, I've seen her fight. She likes to hang back and pick her targets off with a rifle and biotics."_

-Kasumi Goto

"_That's because she needs to keep an eye on all of you, not running around like a vanguard. Besides, using biotics over long periods

kinda tires you out quickly."_

Jeff "Joker" Moreau

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****THE ARK, FORBIDDEN CITY****

Jane was feeling quite nervous, the clinically white reflective panels of the walls served of little comfort to her. Everywhere, were wall mounted screens displaying her vitals and other bodily functions, in full colour. Can lights bolted into the ceiling, casted a moderate white glow.

The Spectre lay on the grey formfitting bed, wearing absolutely nothing, covered only by a thin blanket. Revealing her toned shapely body, and making her slightly uncomfortable. But thankfully, the majority of doctors in the room were female, and the males didn't look at her with lust. Everything here, was cold professionalism, something Jane was actually thankful for this time.

"Nervous?" Cortana asked, as she _walked_ over.

"Quite," Jane breathed. She heard the beeps from the monitor quicken in pace as her heart rate increased.

"Calm down," the AI said softly, placing a hand on Jane's shoulder, "deep breath."

Thee beeps began to decrease, Jane found it odd that an AI had successful calmed her down in seconds. _So lifelike._

A small pulse began to chime, as the scans began. Out of the corner of her eye, Jane could see the screens wink as her biofeeds came into view.

"This process will take a while," said Keyes, "are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Shepard breathed.

"You'll be happy to know that the augmentation process is similar to the threes."

"Meaning?" She asked, turning her head to face the doctor.

"Stage one will be over quickly, stage two is getting use to the enhancements."

"So, to what extent will my abilities be enhanced?"

Keyes gazed down to his tablet, before placing it onto a counter.

"You'll be able to lift objects three times your weight, reaction time will increase exponentially, and endurance will be increased significantly," the Doctor replied.

"Like John?"

"No," Essingdon shook his head, "he had a lifetime for the augmentations to grow and enhance with him, and the enhancements used areâ€¦|_difficult_ to control. The ones we're using on you are toned down, and far safer. This is to allow a wider pool of candidates, especially veterans."

Jane noticed how Keyes worded his last sentence. The amount of time she had spent with John, she could tell that he was moulded by the military, from a very young age. She knew exactly what the doctor meant in terms of enhancements. The ones used on the Spartan-IIs made them inevitably superior than any other SPARTAN programs, both cognitively and physically. But the cost of creating such fine soldiers was that the process was a hit and miss, even when the finest candidates are used. Augmentations used in the later SPARTAN programs provided a higher rate of success, albeit at the cost of quality.

Though why Keyes had sent her this message, Shepard wasn't too sure, she had a gut feeling that it might have to do something with guilt. Jane pondered on the conversation a bit more, before having to stuff away her thoughts. The augmentation process, was about to begin.

"We're also going to leave your neural implants alone, so no Positronic Brain lattice will be merged into you."

"What does the Positronic Brain do, exactly?"

"It allows the subject to interface with terminals through touch, increases reaction time, boosts the immune system, makes the subject more resistant to radiation and allows full recovery from most grievous injuries. Recently, we've learnt that it dampens mass effect fields in extremely close proximity."

"So what do the nanites do?"

"Nanites are like the extra guardians and workers of the body. They isolate and destroy infections before they spread. However, the nanites do not boost the immune system, it may look like they do, but they don't. They provide no protection against radiation, and it can be assumed that they don't affect mass effect fields. Nanites also aids in the subject's physical recovery. They also increase reaction time; amplify electrical impulses from the nervous system, and enhance physical strength. When combined with PBL, both increase the effectiveness of the user exponentially."

Shepard paused, "so can these be used to combat the Flood?"

"Yes," Keyes nodded, "these can be used to impede or halt Flood assimilation."

"By scrambling the host's neurological frequencies?" Shepard asked.

Keyes nodded, clearly impressed by the Spectre's intelligence. "It is effective on the small scale, but if the Flood were to completely overwhelm the host, then assimilation will take place."

"The Flood becomes smarter with everyone they consume," Shepard could feel her skin prickle. The Reapers were bad enough, but the Flood was

a whole different story. They even managed to assimilate sentient machines. "So if the Forerunner had this technology, why did they lose?"

"Because both the nanites and PBL are organic as well, in swarms, the Flood can overwhelm these systems before the body is incinerated, and even if it is, the Flood still grows."

"The body becomes a food source," Jane breathed.

"Precisely."

"Extending injectors," Cortana said.

The low hum of machinery ringed in Shepard's ear, as white seamless mechanical arms began to animate with great precision. Walking over with an inhalant mask, Keyes slowly placed the apparatus over Shepard's face.

"Here we go," he said calmly.

The soft plastic cupped the Spectre's jaw. An Aloe Vera scent flooded Jane's olfactory senses, quickly sending her into a deep slumber.

â€|

"Subject is stable," a doctor said.

"Essingdon, you should take a look at this," said Amanda, brushing aside a lock of her red hair.

"What is it?" Keyes asked, moving behind the console.

"Shepard has been augmented before, cybernetics mostly. Concentration of cybernetics seems to be around regions that would most likely have suffered most damaged when a person dies in a vacuum and lands on the ground at terminal velocity."

Keyes recalled what John had told him about in referral to the first Normandy's destruction. He knew about Shepard's death, and how Cerberus brought her back to life. The feat was no doubt extremely impressive. Yet oddly enough, Essingdon found that the cybernetics were remarkably similar to those the UNSC used. It would make the process run more smoothly.

"Inject the nanites first, it'll make it easier for us to graft on the augmentations without interfering with her cybernetics," Keyes said. He couldn't risk doing the normal augmentation process without endangering Shepard's life. The nanite grafting method would take a few days longer, but far safer in the Spectre's case.

"Got it."

"Inserting injectors," Cortana said.

The mechanical arms slowly pushed the needles into Shepard's flesh. Some drilled into her bones; others would enter her veins or internal organs.

"Injecting nanites," Keyes said calmly.

"Injecting," said a doctor entering a few commands into a console.

A silvery liquid began to course through the tubes, and into Shepard's veins, dispersing throughout her body. The bioscanners immediately picked up on the metallic spike, indicating a successful merge with the nanites.

"Cortana, order the nanites to disperse the augmentations at the highlighted area," Keyes said, as he began to mark every section of Shepard's body with care and precision.

Pulling up medical reports sent to him by EDI, Essingdon flicked through the long list of upgrades Shepard received during Project Lazarus. The Illusive Man may have wanted to keep the Spectre's mind the way it was, but it didn't stop him from authorising Miranda to give the Commander a better body.

_Project Phoenix Enhancements
>Project Phoenix Biotic Implants

Alliance N7 training â€" Fury and Shadow proficiency

Keyes raised an eyebrow at Shepard's training resume. EDI had provided a brief statement â€" with Hackett's authorisation of course â€" about the fighting styles of each field.

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****EARTH, LONDON, ENGLAND****

"This doesn't look so bad," Lotus whispered as the convoy trudged through the desolate city.

"Say that when the sun comes up," Greystone remarked, "you'll see more of the Reaper's handiwork."

"Do you think Donnie's gone to get us help?"

"He should be at the Ark by now," Arca replied.

"Do you think they would've thrown the Chief a party?" Lotus asked.

"Knowing Arby and Maria," Arca pondered, "they would've thrown him a small private one."

"I'm jealous," Lotus pouted.

"Why?" Greystone asked, "is it because Chief gets all the fame and love while we're called monsters?"

"No, it's because he gets cake."

"We have cake here," Greystone said slowly, furrowing his brows.

"But it's not torte," Lotus explained.

"Delish," Arca added.

As Greystone pulled the damaged hog around another bend, he couldn't help but notice that a lot of the stores still had their goods inside.

"Reapers must've hit this place hard and fast," the Operative said.

"Yeah, the stores haven't been looted clean," Arca agreed.

Pharmacies were empty for obvious reasons, but many other stores still had shelves full of goods.

"Where'd all the civvies go?" Lotus wondered.

"Dead, dying or just not here anymore," Arca answered, unwrapping a chocolate bar.

"Looks like you'll be good for the rest of the day," Lotus referred to the chocolate, "so, can I get your MRE then?"

Nutrition absorption in Spartans is far more efficient than that of a normal person. This meant that they could go out on long reconnaissance missions, with only a protein bar to hold them over for the entire duration. Of course, this didn't stop them from wolfing down piles of food whenever they got the chance.

"I'm not going to bother to say anything to him," Greystone sighed.

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****THE ARK, FORBIDDEN CITY, LODGE****

The forest, it's always the forest. That dark, lifeless forest. There's the boy, the boy I saw on earth. He's crying.

He's sobbing amongst the crowd of black wisps. I felt the urge to protect him, to run to him, and cradle him. Why is it always this boy? Have I met him before Earth? I don't even know him.

The whispers, some of them were just conversations, others are begging for me. I don't like it. I don't think I can handle the burden.

The roar, the roar of the Reapers, it was always loud, unforgiving and forsaken. The ground around the boy was lit blood red. He's scared, and running. I need to protect him.

He stopped by the tree, stopped running, and curled up into a ball. He's scared. I must protect him!

I kept on running towards him, my armoured hand reaching out to him. He stands up, and looks towards me. He's looking at me with those innocent bewildered eyes.

"_Come to me," I urged. But he just stood there. The leaves and twigs

around him began snap and hiss. They caught alight, the flames licked at him hungrily. He should've ran! But he just stood there._

By the time I reached him, he's just ashes.

Explosions began to tear through the forest. I can hear the gunfire in the distance.

"_Fall back! They're breaking through!"_

I looked around; the forest has become a warzone. UNSC and Alliance soldiers are fighting alongside one another. They're shooting at something. They're all scared. The roar of the Reapers, are dying.

"_Shepard," came the deep voice. I turned around to see John, his armour, battered and scarred. "Jane?"_

I can't answer him, I can't talk. My body doesn't respond. He's looking at something, something on me.

"_Stay still, you've been hurt badly," he says._

I begin to slump, the sound of war crescendo. He catches me in his arms. I can feel the pain spreading throughout my body. It's like I've been set on fire. He cradles me, and shields me from the fighting.

"_Just hold on, everything will be fine," he said reassuringly. I believe him. His words, soothing._

The world begins to fade for me as I look up towards the grey sky. Fighters screeches overhead.

"_Cover the Chief!"_

Who is that? He sounds familiar.

Three men, I recognise those men, they're the Intel boys. Essingdon's friends. They moved in perfect cohesion, taking the brunt of enemy fire. I can see their shields flare; I know their armour is made for direct confrontations.

"_Chief, we've got you covered, get to the â€" oh my godâ€"!"_

The fighting stopped. The guns stopped firing; soldiers just got up, and looked at the new sun in the sky.

â€"

Shepard winced as she opened her eyes, her chest heaved as she tried to comprehend her dream. The room was dark, but the light, it still hurt her eyes. She could see everything in the room, in perfect detail. The walls were of a soft cream colour, the white curtains were closed, furniture was of a wooden oak theme, and there was a soft pine scent in the room.

She glanced at the clock, and realised that only two seconds had passed since she awoke. It had been a long time since Shepard last saw an analogue clock; the second hand ticked ever so slowly. _Is

this what it's like_? She wondered.

Jane stretched her fingers, it hurt, it felt like fire ants crawling and biting throughout her hands. She tired moving her arm again, this time it didn't hurt as much, but something was stopping her. The Commander looked down at the duvets, and realised she was restrained.

"Good to see you awake, Commander," Cortana said, appearing on the nearby pedestal.

"Cortana?"

"Last time I checked," the AI grinned.

"Why am I tied to the bed?" Shepard groaned, trying to move.

"Easy now, you've been asleep for six hours," Cortana said calmly, "the restraints are to stop soldiers from tearing up the place once they've gotten the enhancements. Keeps the staff safe."

"Wait, I thought the enhancements didn't drive people insane," Jane frowned.

"No, it's not that," Cortana explained, "usually, the subjects get a bit too excited, and that they're not quite use to the augmentations."

"Oh."

"Well, since our good friends Essingdon and John are away at another meeting with the Command, I'll be getting you up to speed. Be in your room soon."

The pedestal winked off, giving Shepard a few short minutes to herself. As the door eased open, Cortana entered, in her hardlight body.

"Releasing the restraints, I want you to move slowly and take your time."

With the restraints retreating back into their sockets, Shepard slowly eased herself up from the bed. Pinpricks of pain riddled her body as she moved with caution.

"The pain will go away faster, the more you move," the AI informed.

Jane winced, as her bare feet touched the wool carpet. "How long does the pain usually last?"

"An hour," Cortana said, "the nanites numb the pain while repairing the body."

"So, how long until I get use to the changes?"

"A day or two. S-Fours tend to recover faster after the augmentations."

"Is there anyone else here?"

"No," Cortana replied, "just you and me. But, Keyes has told me that he's making some arrangements for your crew to meet you in a few hours, at a country club."

Shepard was slightly surprised at the answer. It was clear to her, that AIs here were sentient and lifelike, so much so, that they had been entrusted to handle important tasks without supervision.

Pulling herself off the bed, Jane experienced a brief moment of dizziness as her body was coping with the enhancements.

"Keyes has left you something to get changed into." The AI gestured to a bag.

"But I have my own clothes," Shepard said.

"It's a body suit for your new armour."

"What's wrong with my old one?"

"When you were asleep, EDI forwarded us some of your career history; so that we could tailor your gear to you."

"You mean my operational history before getting a command of my own?" Shepard asked, connecting the dots.

"Smart girl," Cortana smiled, "yes that is exactly what I mean. You have excellent combat prowess, not with just a gun."

"Biotics are very taxing."

"Precisely," said the AI, "that's why you have the augmentations. You'll recover faster, and your body is stronger. Your biotics will be than it was before. Chances of suffering from biotic fatigue under normal circumstances are very slim."

"Okay, let me get changed."

"I'll see you down stairs then."

Cortana left, closing the door behind her, leaving Jane alone in the room once more.

Take it slow.

Shepard waded steadily across to the bag, her motions, fluid and precise. The bag immediately scanned her, and whispered, "Access granted." Before opening and displaying its contents.

Jane let her robes drop to the floor, and examined her bare body in the mirror. Her skin had a healthy glow to it; the tan lines had disappeared, most likely due to the operation. Her body was well-toned, displaying power and strength, while remaining feminine with gracious curves. She was also taller too, maybe by a few inches. And her eyes, calm sea blue eyes that seemed to glow.

The suit seemed to be split into different sections, like a set of clothing. Shepard started out with the shirts and pants, before

putting on the shoes and gloves. The moment she had donned the final article, the clothes began to merge at the seams to become a skin tight body suit. It brought back old memories of Jane's younger days.

Shepard tugged at the wrist as if she was going to take off a glove, to her surprise, the suit split apart at the seams, allowing her to take it off with ease in the near future.

Heading down to the living room, Shepard found a nice glass of iced latte waiting for her, alongside with streamlined armour plates and weapons.

"This all for me?" Jane asked, sipping on the cold beverage.

Cortana nodded. "Try them on."

Like the suit, the armour plates sported an onyx black and grey livery.

"Flexi-composite armour," the AI said, "rigid on impact, but flexible when pushed. Perfect for your combat prowess."

Attaching all of the plates to the suit, Jane found the armour to be very streamlined and sleek. None of her movements were impeded, but enhanced; it was like having a second skin.

"Took a while to get the suit calibrated to your neural implants, but Keyes got it in the end," Cortana said.

The helmet that Jane eased onto her head was like a mask, the entire object could disassemble itself and stow itself away, but can also reform in an instant to protect the user's head. The black visor was something to behold.

"There's another thing Keyes, Halsey and T'Soni made for you," Cortana said, picking up a rectangular box. Lifting the lid off, the AI revealed a finely crafted sword.

"It looks like a cross between a Yanmaodao and an elven sword from the Lord of the Rings lore," said Jane.

"Fan of Tolkien's works, are we?"

"Quite," Shepard smiled.

The sword was about a metre long, the last quarter of the blade and the long hilt were curved, whereas the main section was straight. It looked very modern and sleek, but also displaying its ancient heritage proudly.

"Try it," the AI said.

Shepard grasped the hilt of the weapon, it was balanced perfectly.

"Will it to turn on."

"Neural implants?"

"Yes," Cortana nodded.

In an instant, the blade crackled to life as cobalt wisps began to curl up from the blade.

"It's a monomolecular blade combined with eezo. It allows you to channel you're biotics through the blade, making you're attacks more precise and powerful."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," Cortana then added, "on behalf of the brains trusts that did this of course. I'm not a big fan of credit stealing; besides, I've already done my share of scientific exploration?"

"Atmospheric slipspace jumps I presume?" Jane asked.

"You're good," the AI complimented.

"So I've been told."

"Well, it's noon, which means we can meet up with Keyes and the Chief at the pit they booked."

"Pit?"

"We're going to let you run wild for a bit."

****XXxxxXX****

"_CM-222D Cyclops is a four metre tall combat mech, designed to fill out roles that the Titan is incapable of, such as heavy lifting, melee combat and close infantry support."_

CM-222 Series guide

****XXxxxXX****

****A/N: Just got the N7 Shadow Infiltrator Character on multiplayer« sweet mother of god!****

****Badassery, must give more to Shepard. Something I see a lack of in most fics out there.
>«**

****For all intents of moving the plot along, I had to make the recovery time quick. Besides, remember the Spartan-IIIs? Carter became el-buffo in less than a minute.****

25. Concerning Hope

****A/N: To Doood****

****If you put indoctrination in that sense, then we're all indoctrinated. Mental Conditioning is a more accurate definition to what the Spartan's went through. They were taught everything in order to better understand their enemies.****

****Indoctrination is the absolute subjugation to a set of ideals and philosophies, blindly. This means that the person who is indoctrinated is incapable of perceiving, embracing and/or comprehending different ideals, because they only have one relative measure (which is their own).****

****Mental conditioning, is where the subject is capable of understanding/learning different ideologies, but has been conditioned to carry out tasks that are morally unacceptable (which they know it is). What the Spartan-IIs have displayed is mental conditioning, they acknowledge that some things they do are socially unacceptable, and they feel uncomfortable about it. But they process their unease quickly and compartmentalise. Refer to the Spartan-IIs' first deployment.****

****I know what you mean, except, I beg to differ on terminology.****

****XXxxXX****

"_**Office of Naval Intelligence
>Special Activities Division
Psychological and Physiological
Report**_

**Classification: Epsilon**

_**Field report by: **__Colonel Veronica Dare_

It's no secret that ONISAD Operatives keep to themselves a lot. We are under the impression that all Operatives are in perfect physical and mental health. The truth is far from it.

Post-Mission-IP/SD-R0235, Frank Ryans was observed to be experiencing severe headache, sensitivity to light, shaking hands, and bleeding from the eyes.

The mission appeared to take a heavy toll on the team's mentality, they didn't joke until they reached Coalition held space.

_**Analysis by: **__ Doctor Emma Eliza Harp_

_Through __mental conditioning__, Operatives have great self-discipline and restraint. But they are still human, and were raised in (what is a socially acceptable), good environment. Their morals are in conflict with what they do. The only reason why they have not resigned is that they fear they cannot cope with "normal" life._

Using humour is one of the ways that the Operatives use, to cope with the stress. Though, I'm noticing a decline in comical and jovial behaviour.

There are times when certain things trigger traumatic memories, causing them to enter a panicked state. Note that this only occurs when Operatives are off-duty/deployment.

_Intense memories trigger physiological responses such as:

>Sensitivity to light
Sensitivity to noise (e.g. crying baby)

>Headaches
Increased heart rate

>Sweating

And in extreme cases, bleeding from the eyes and noses â€" Note that nanites fail to clot and stop these bleedings, and they are also not present in the dispelled blood.

This is comparable to narcotics; Operatives experience extreme withdrawal like symptoms, when off-rotation. However, it should be noted that only Operatives with extensive Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism, display these symptoms. (Operatives more involved with direct action missions do not display these levels of stress).

It can be assumed that their deployment in developing regions leave a heavy toll. Every Operative, acts out of necessity, they take no particular pleasure in what they do.

Mental conditioning:

_Mental conditioning can only last for so long before it is no longer effective. Our longest serving Operatives have been with ONISAD for over 1000 years. Before joining the organisation, they themselves had expected to retire, but suddenly, one day they learn they can live indefinitely.

>These Operatives have served for so long that the only thing keeping them going, is commitment.

Addendum; we may need to screen all Spartan-IIs and IIIs when the opportunity arises; they may be going through the early stages of aforementioned conditions. It would be wise to have the Spartans put on long service leave.

Operatives flagged:

_Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge

>I have noted that Zhuge (or Stanforth as he prefers), has been on little leave. He states that the more of "the ignorant world [he] sees, the worse it gets. People never understand the clandestine world, yet they act as if they do, and the spit on what we give." This strongly indicates that Stanforth may be incapable of re-joining society. He also wishes to be referred by his middle or first name, clearly indicating that he has fallen out of his family. (Note, he still sends his family gifts, hinting that he still cares for his family, but he can no longer relate to them).
Like many Operatives, field work seems to have a narcotic effect. A lull in action tends to cause Stanforth to reflect on his past. Under discreet observation, we have discovered that his eyes do bleed from time to time._

_Archer â€" Sam Rhys Fletcher

>Appears to suffer from survivor's guilt, Fletcher has experienced strings of nightmares and hence, rarely sleeps. He also suffers from light to moderate headaches, blurred vision and has shown sensitivity to light. He has also stated that he has fallen out with his family.
Like many Operatives, field work seems to have a narcotic effect. A lull in action tends to cause Fletcher to reflect on his past. Under discreet observation, we have discovered that his eyes do

bleed from time to time._

_Bishop " Frank Donald Ryans

>He appears to be suffering from survivor's guilt, like Fletcher. Ryans has stated that he experiences extremely painful headaches from time to time. Noises such as a crying baby disturb him greatly. This could be due to prolonged counter-insurgency operations in the Omega cluster. Omega is notorious for being a mob run area, civilian casualties are always high. Ryans has stated that children have been caught in the crossfire, and more than once, he has been forced to shoot them.
No reported incidents of extreme symptoms._

_Greystone " Brian Northorne Zhuge

>Although he has less clandestine experience than Stanforth's, it is no doubt higher than most others. It is difficult to determine if he is suffering from the same symptoms as other Operatives, but following past trends, it is very likely that he is.
Zhuge is generally quiet, but he does make the occasional joke, to reign in Zhou. _

_Lotus " Bright Qin Zhou

>Zhou's operational history is more or less limited to guerrilla training, targeted killings, raids, ambushes and special reconnaissance. Experience in Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism is minimal. He displays a very minor morbid flare (more evident when fighting the Flood), and has a particular preference for melee.
He is one of the very few Operatives not to be suffering from severe stress.

>It should also be noted that he is engaged and soon to be married. Many Operatives are not in a relationship nor do they have the desire to pursue one.
Zhou is a peculiar case in that he is more cheerful, albeit surrounded by two of the most experienced Operatives."_

Extract from weekly ONISAD Psychological and Physiological Report

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****EARTH, LONDON, BRITAIN****

Sitting in the remains of a hotel room, it was difficult for Brian to see London again. He was raised in London during his earlier years before boarding at Exemplar. London, he held a special place for it. Seeing it, like the way it was, reminded him of everything. Everything that he had done in his life, everything he gave up. Seeing London made him think about everything.

"_There are children shooting at us!" _he remembered his first team leader say.

Brian's pulse began to quicken, he could feel it. Agonisingly, he pulled himself into the till functional bathroom and pulled off his helmet, letting it clatter onto the marble floor. He could see and feel the blood trickle down his cheeks.

Hoping that the plumbing still worked, Brian waved his hand across the sensor, and was rewarded by a stream of clean water. Diluted blood splashed onto the basin, but there seemed to be no end to the

trickle of crimson red. Forcing himself to take slow deep breaths, he could feel his pulse decrease, and a stop to the blood. Brian gazed down at his shaking hands; he could see the faint outline of red on his gloves.

Calm down, Brian thought to himself, _so this is how it feels._

This was the first time the bleeding had happened to him. He had heard about it before from Anthony and other operatives. They described an overwhelming, helpless feeling when it happened.

"Hey," Anthony called out softly. Brian hadn't even heard him enter. "You okay?"

"Fine," Brian lied as he filled the basin with cold water.

"You're not fine," Anthony said, entering the bathroom.

Brian dunked his head into the water, pulling himself out of the pinkish liquid; he found two pairs of deep luminous blue eyes looking at him.

"Where's Bright?" Brian asked.

Anthony ignored the question, and pulled out a bottle from his pouch. "Drink it; it'll help calm you down."

"What is it?"

"Ice cold taro milk tea," Anthony answered. "You need it more than I do."

Brian gave a curt nod, before unscrewing the lid and downing the contents. The cool liquid splashed down his throat, and to his surprise, calmed him. Zhuge guessed it was a placebo effect, either way, he was still grateful for it.

"What were you thinking about?" Anthony asked.

"My first mission into the Omega Cluster, before you and Bright joined Fifth Element."

"What happened?"

"We ran into some kids on a drug high, we were forced to shoot them. I barely made it out alive," Brian sighed. "I envy Bright."

"We've done our best to keep him _innocent_," Anthony said, "I want him to leave ONISAD, and live a happy life."

"Let's hope it's not too late for him," Brian said sadly, "but it is too late for us."

"There are times; I wonder what my life would've been like I became something else. I'd probably be living with Delilah, and still be close to Emily and Ryan."

"Do they know the truth?" Brian asked, but he knew the answer to his question.

"They still think we go to conferences."

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****THE ARK, UNSC HIGHCOM****

Hood read through the paper folder as the UNSC's Admirals, Generals and Air Chief Marshalls were discussing battle plans. All of the Coalition's forces had been mobilised, and were on standby. Analysts were working round the clock to process information being sent to them, from the Alliance. The information would then be sent off to Command, Logistics and Administration in order for the Allied forces to methodically defeat the Reapers.

"Your coffee, sir," a staff said, placing a steaming mug onto the table.

"Thanks," Hood said.

"We're in this to save our own, right?" asked Air Chief Marshal Gary Weiss. He was a Caucasian man, with a strong build, black hair and brown eyes.

Terrence paused, "we'll see how this war turns out."

"But we're not at war yet," Weiss said.

"We soon will be."

â€|

_**UNSC Defence Force
>__**UNSC Navy**_

**Home Defence Fleet:** Operational, recalled all reserves._

__Defence Group Installation-00_

_ Defence Group Installation-01_

_ Defence Group Installation-02_

_ Defence Group Installation-03_

_ Defence Group Installation-04_

_ Defence Group Installation-05_

_ Defence Group Installation-06_

_ Defence Group Installation-07_

_**Logistical Fleet: **_On standby to provide logistical support_

_ Group-01
>Group-02
Group-03
>Group-04
Group-05_

_(1**__**st**__** Fleet) Sol Fleet: **__Flagship is UNSC
_Majestic

_ Carrier Strike Group Earth (CSG-01)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Mars (CSG-02)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Jupiter (CSG-03)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Saturn (CSG-04)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Venus (CSG-05)_

**Epsilon Eridani Fleet**
_ Carrier Strike Group Reach (CSG-06)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Tribute (CSG-07)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Circumstance (CSG-08)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Beta Gabriel (CSG-09)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Grasp (CSG-10)_

**Ectanus Fleet**
_ Carrier Strike Group Chi Rho (CSG-11)_
_ Carrier Strike Group New Hampton (CSG-12)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Detworth (CSG-13) _
_ Carrier Strike Group Leventhorn (CSG-14)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Beijing (CSG-15)_

**Cygnus Fleet**
_ Carrier Strike Group New Jerusalem (CSG-16)_
_ Carrier Strike Group New Acre (CSG-17)_
_ Carrier Strike Group New Cyprus (CSG-18)_
_ Carrier Strike Group New Florence (CSG-19)_
_ Carrier Strike Group New Venice (CSG-20)_

**Orion Fleet**
_ Carrier Strike Group Alpha (CSG-21)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Beta (CSG-22)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Gamma (CSG-23)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Delta (CSG-24)_
_ Carrier Strike Group Epsilon (CSG-25)_

**Perseus Fleet**
**Norma Fleet**
**Scutrun-Crux Fleet**
**Carina Fleet**
**Sagittarius Fleet**
**Centauri Fleet**
**Magellanic Fleet**
_**13**__**th**__** Fleet**_
_**14**__**th**__** Fleet**_
_**15**__**th**__** Fleet**_
_**16**__**th**__** Fleet**_
_**18**__**th**__** Fleet**_
_**19**__**th**__** Fleet**_
_**20**__**th**__** Fleet**_
_**21**__**st**__** Fleet**_
_**22**__**nd**__** Fleet**_

_**Fleet wide status: **__Operational, ready to move
immediately_

**Office of Naval Intelligence:**

_SPARTAN Program: All active duty Spartans are ready to be
deployed._

Prowler Corp

**Section 1:**

_ Electronics and Cyber Warfare Division_
_ Intelligence Reconnaissance Division_

_**NAVSPECWAR Teams: **__Ready for deployment_

**Special Activities Division:**

All teams have been recalled.

_[Those not assigned to HOMECOMING] Teams will be allocated to
Alliance N7 teams requiring assistance._

**Fifth Element:**

___Extensive Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism
experience_

Recommend redeployment to combat Cerberus.

[Once strong UNSC presence on Earth has been established]

_**UNSC Marine Corp:**__ Mobilised_

_**Orbital Drop Shock Trooper:**__ All divisions mobilised_

**UNSC Army**

**Airborne Corp:**

___1st Division (Tier 1)_

_ 2__nd__ Division_

_ 3__rd__ Division_

_ 4__th__ Division_

_ 5__th__ Division_

_**Regular: **__Mobilised_

_**Logistics:**__ Mobilised_

_**Mechanised Infantry: **__Mobilised_

_**Mountain Infantry:**__ Mobilised_

_**Armoured:**__ Mobilised_

_**Status: **__Operational, ready to move._

_**UNSC Air Force:**__ Mobilised_

UNSC Home Guard: On standby.

â€|

Placing down the folder, Hood contacted Hackett, via the Quantum Entanglement Relay. The large console chimed for a few moments, before the feed cleared and the Admiral appeared.

"Admiral Hackett, how are you holding?" Hood asked.

"We're being stretched thin as it is," Hackett answered, "I'm having people strike the Reapers at every new theatre of war being opened. The Protoheans were stronger than us, but they didn't last. My people estimate that we'll fall within the decade."

"Hold on a little longer, we're coming," Terrence reassured. He had read the analysis given to him by Keyes and ONI. Already, the Reapers had destroyed a species from within. Most of the homeworlds were already under siege. "How are the people doing?"

"Not good," Hackett said solemnly, "you already know the line of

succession is becoming shorter. And whatever's left of our population has been evacuated. Pretty soon, we'll have nowhere to go. So what's the plan?"

"All of the Coalition's armed forces are mobilised. Our analysts and strategists are organising a systematic process to retake and secure worlds. We'll be ready to move within two days."

"Let's hope we can hold out that long," Hackett frowned, "I've got word that the Reapers are stepping up their attacks."

"Admiral Thomas Lasky, he's one of the best I have. He'll be leading Sol Fleet to the Citadel, then onto Earth. Along with a couple of diplomats, I will visit the Council as a sign of good faith, then attend the military summit, before moving out with Perseus Fleet and Logistical Group-Three, to help with the construction of the Cruicble. Tier-One and ONISAD teams will assist in asymmetrical warfare. Remaining fleets will secure Council homeworlds."

"Sounds like a plan," Hackett said with a clear tone of relief. "A word of advice though, the Council has a habit of being whiny, arrogant sycophants. They'll complain at just about anything, while trying to further their own agendas. If it can be helped, keep them in the dark."

"The Chief told me that the Council refused to help humanity," Hood said. The past interstellar wars that the UNSC had fought in were costly and had made everyone weary. It was only by circumstance, that humanity managed to work alongside the Covenant Seperatists, albeit with grudging respect. Although the current ruling species were overzealous and fanatical, they were hesitant and scared. Terrence knew, in his heart of hearts, that if the UEG hadn't granted the UNSC emergency powers, humanity would've just been an entry in an archive.

Somehow, he feared the same for the Council; they were a political body with no real experience in warfare. Sure they would've fought against rebellions, but those rebellions are nothing in comparison to an organised military faction. But he wasn't going to demand them to hand over their power to the military. Coalition diplomats will provide political and military advice to the Council, in hopes that they may divert their forces to where they are most needed.

"It was disheartening," Hackett said, rubbing his eyes, "but expected. The Council views humanity as second rate, they'll throw us to the wolves if it means they could save one of their worlds."

"I take it, this has happened before," Hood said.

"Admiral Thomas Lasky, here. Well if this has happened before," Lasky interrupted, "we could lose a lot more people."

Lasky's view was understandable. As much as the UEG and UNSC wanted to return to Earth and uplift all of humanity, there was the problem of clingy and demanding species. Hood reasoned for the UEG to handle the politics of the situation, but still, he wasn't too keen on leading his people any further into the meat grinder than they had to.

"I know we outclass the Reapers in technology," Lasky continued, "but

they outnumber us. We only one- hundred-and-ten Carrier Strike Groups that makes eleven-thousand combat ready ships available for us. Now, include the Prowler Corps, Home Defence Fleet and the Elites, total Coalition naval strength is thirty-thousand ships. As a whole, our numbers are just a fraction of what it was post-Human-Covenant War."

"What are you saying, Admiral?" Hackett asked.

"I've made some calculations; the Reapers have had millions of years to cumulate in strength. There is a high chance that they haven't even devoted their entire force into pacify the galaxy. You've said that the billions of worlds have been colonised, correct?"

"Yes, though most have been evacuated, or overrun by the Reapers," Hackett added.

Lasky got up from his front row seat, and walked onto the stage.

"The worlds that have been overrun by the Reapers," Lasky continued calmly, "would provide a lot of bodies and resources for them to gain in number, both naval and ground strength. Millions of bodies to provide the gestalt mind, the planet's resources to build the ship. The Reapers are not stretched at all; they grow stronger as every day passes. For ever ship we destroy, more will take its place. What I'm saying is this; the Coalition cannot work a miracle, we are not salvation as you would like to see it as. We still need the help of other species. "

There were murmurs of agreement throughout the conference hall.

"It's a grim situation that none of us likes to be in," Hackett said, placing a hand on his chin, "and I understand your concern about the other species, but we'll do everything we can, to get everyone on board."

"I don't mean to sound like a pessimist, but I don't see how we can come out of this with a pretty bow-tie," Lasky said, ending with a cliché phrase.

"I understand," Hackett agreed completely, "but we have been working on a Prothean device, dubbed the Crucible. We believe it to have the capacity to defeat the Reapers."

As Lasky returned to his seat, he whispered to Keyes, "Xenoscience, aren't you going to add something?"

"I will soon," Essingdon whispered back.

"Admiral Parangosky, here. I've had some of my people look into what the Crucible does." The Head of ONI said. Hearing her speak, some of the officer's blood ran cold, as for Hood and a handful of others; they felt a certain level of animosity towards her.

"I'd be glad to hear it," Hackett said, unaware of Parangosky's status. "We've still got a few missing components, which will allow us to utilise it."

Lasky and Hood caught Keyes, glaring at Parangosky. Both the Admirals knew why.

"Doctor Keyes, if you will," Orlenda said, sounding as if it was an order. All eyes turned onto one of the UNSC's best minds.

With the subtle beckoning of Thomas Lasky, Keyes slowly got up, and moved towards the podium. Essingdon noticed how the Head of ONI didn't use his first name.

"Well, the plans referred to something called, 'The Catalyst'," the scientist began, both hands held behind his back. "I've run some simulations, and have come to the conclusion, that the Catalyst is the Citadel. Design schematics strongly suggest this notion. Dimensions on the Crucible interact perfectly, with the dimensions of the Citadel."

Hackett raised an eyebrow, "we've had that kind of speculation on our end as well. If the Crucible exploited the technology of mass relays, then it would only seem logical. Confirmation would be nice, but if we need to ballpark it, then the Citadel's our best bet."

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"_Teleporters, we can utilise this technology for rapid deployment of heavy equipment onto the battlefield."_

-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** (Military Reportâ€| ran out of things to put in â€" just wanted you guys to get the idea). Next Chapter will be out soonâ€| hopefullyâ€| no promises.**

****As always, please review, reviews keeps me going.****

26. Oscar Mike

****A/N:** The long awaited action filled chapterâ€| I think.**

****After reading Greg Bear's worksâ€| I can't help but tear my hair out in frustrationâ€| this guy is practically changing the Halo loreâ€| a lot! So, I'll need to address a few things here and there. Well, at least when Silentium is out, there will be no more change to the lore.****

****So, the changes:****

****There are two Arks â€" I'm going to assume that Greater Ark is greater in diameter (even though I have no solid evidence). >Lesser Ark is more civilian based.
Greater Ark is the Capital of the Coalition â€" UNSC HIGHCOM and ONI HQ is located here.****

****All**** Halos are 30,000km in diameter. There are 12 Halos.****

****This newfound information will be incorporated later into the story. (Changes will be most evident in Hood's journal and the reports).****

****Also, I've really taking a liking to some of the characters in **Halo 4: Forward Unto Dawn**. I'm hoping that they won't kill off some of the characters, as I want to implement them into the story.****

****Future changes:****

****Inclusion of the following characters:**

**>Micheal Sully Sullivan
JJ Chen
>Chyler Silva
Dimah****

****Changes to lore in regards to Forerunner creations, and Forerunner history.****

****XXXXXX****

**"_Restoration Protocols
>-Enacted**

Installations will be restored to previous size, of 30,000km in diameter.

**_Reclamation Protocols
>-Enacted**

Lesser Ark and Greater Ark are relocating to the Magellenic clouds"

-Forerunner Mainframe, Year 2570

****XXXXXX****

****THE GREATER ARK, FORT WALL (30KM FROM FORBIDDEN CITY),
PIT-002****

The artificial sky had faded into a deep orange. Tired workers and students were heading home to enjoy the gifts of a Friday night. Within the confines of a training pit, Shepard and Cortana, waited for Keyes and his party to arrive. Jane looked around the large rink lined with AstroTurf. A glass dome stretched overhead, revealing the evening sky.

"I was just thinking," Shepard began, "how'd you know about Lord of the Rings?"

"EDI," Cortana replied, "when she forwarded me data for the missing link, I came across the Lord of the Ring trilogy. I found it quite enjoyable."

"I see," Jane said, "anyway, is there anyone else coming here?"

"Well, there's your team, and a few UNSC scientists coming in," Cortana answered, "looks like they're taking their seats too."

The doors on the far side of the rink parted, allowing the Chief and

Keyes to enter. Like Shepard, the Spartan-II was wearing combat fatigues, minus the armour. Essingdon on the other hand, was wearing a conservative suit with a tie and a lab coat.

"Okay, Shepard?" John asked.

The Spectre turned her attention to the lightly tanned face. She remembered how it used to be pale, and the expression devoid of life and happiness.

"Bit sore, but nothing I can't handle," she answered.

"Do you think you can perform some exercises?" Cortana asked.

Shepard stretched her limbs, and winced, before nodding slowly. "I think I can."

"Good, we'll start out slow," Keyes said. "The Chief here will run you through some courses."

Essingdon, tapped in a few commands into his tacpad. Sentinels and an Engineer floated into the room, and gently laid down some obstacles. The scientist beckoned Cortana to come with him, as he moved to the observation post.

Shepard exhaled, while rolling her shoulders. The more she moved, the quicker the pain disappeared.

"Walk her through, Chief," Keyes said over the loud speaker.

From the corner of Jane's eyes, she could see her entire elite cadre sitting in the stands, watching her. Apparently they had been eager to see her again, after her augmentation.

"Bringing up the targets," the Spartan-II said. A couple of wooden dummies extended from the ground, each appeared to be made from oak wood. "Hit the targets as hard as you can."

Jane took a deep breath, and walked close enough to be within striking distance.

"Aim, look where you want your fists to go," John guided. "Take out all of the targets as fast as you can."

Shepard gazed at the dummy's chest, curled her finger while pulling back her hand, and extended. In an instant, the world seemed to slow to a crawl. The chest of the dummy cracked and gave way to the gloved fist. Splinters seemed to fly out at an agonisingly slow speed. Using her newfound flexibility, the Spectre twisted while retracting her fist, and connected her heel into the temple of the next target. The head snapped violently to the side as the top half was raggedly torn off. With momentum in her movements, Shepard leapt into the air like an angel, and struck a vicious kick, which shattered the upper torso of the last target.

"Nicely done," the Chief complimented.

Jane's muscles tingled slightly, but the pain was no longer there. With her sensitive hearing, she picked up on the murmurs of awe and

approval from her team. Even Javik managed a compliment.

"Thanks," Shepard smiled, bringing her breathing back under control.

The now destroyed targets were retracted back into the ground, a couple of drones hovered through to clean up any remaining debris.

"Next, the course," Keyes said over the speaker.

Jane turned her attention to the group of obstacles that looked like only an Olympic gymnast could handle. The Spectre frowned slightly as it had been a very long time since she did acrobatics.

Seeing her slight discomfort, the Chief gave her a few words of reassurance. "Focus, look where you want to go, it's easier than it looks."

Nodding lightly, Shepard took a deep breath and assumed a starting position.

"Whenever you're ready," Keyes said.

Immersing herself into a biotic charge, Shepard shot forward fast than she ever had before. The obstacles seemed to just shatter as she touched them, and before she knew it, Jane had left a sizeable dent in the Pit's walls.

Slightly dazed, Jane rolled her head back and forth before looking at John. He had a surprised look on his face, the expression was barely noticeable, but it was there, and she could see it.

"What?" Shepard asked, slightly shrugging.

"Damn," Jane heard Vega whisper.

"You just destroyed the course," John said, though with a tint of mirth in his voice, "try again. Focus, control your biotics."

"Maybe you guys should use stronger stuff," Shepard said, in a mock condescending manner.

John shook his head lightly, barely noticeable. He signalled to Keyes so that Shepard could run on a different course, albeit made out of hard-light.

Shepard looked at the new course again; it mimicked the environment of a dense coastal city in the Mediterranean. Various colours enhanced the feel, but also acted as safety measures. In the short moments that passed, Jane readied herself once more, unsure of her vast abilities.

She ran through the course with grace and precision that could only be comparable to angelic. Her brown hair had a tough time keeping up with her as she vaulted over vast trenches. Some of the platforms were spaced far apart enough to give a III some grief, but with her biotic abilities, it was nothing.

Landing at the finishing line with elegance that John had only seen

Kelly and Linda match, Shepard walked over to where the Chief was standing, working off the usual light headed feeling that accompanied post-workout.

"Impressive," John complimented with a genuine smile.

"I aim to please," Shepard quipped.

With crystal clear definition, Keyes's voice resounded over the COMs again. "Chief, work Shepard through a sparring session. Our estimate says that she should be ready."

John nodded towards the observation post, filled with scientists.

Jane felt herself wince inwardly as she realised she was going to go hand to hand, with a man that took on half a dozen of feral beasts.

This is so not going to be like me versing James, the Spectre thought, entering the ring. She tugged her Alliance Officer fatigues, rolling the sleeves over her elbow, and took a combat stance she hadn't taken in a long time. Having been trained in Rio, Brazil, Shepard had picked up Capoeira and merged it with her fighting style.

Of course, her opening stance was to be reserved, she would only pick up the tempo once the fight was well underway. With fists held high, and a low curling posture, Jane was ready, or so she hoped. John stood approximately fourteen metres away from her, his fists were partially curled and legs were shoulder's width apart. It was mainly a reaction stance, only adopted by fighters who preferred quick precision strikes as opposed to grapples.

Jane decided to be the one who struck first. Her opening move began with a double feint before aiming a couple of blows to John's ribcage. But the Spartan-II was faster, much faster. Even with the enhancements, Shepard could only see blurs as John swatted aside her punches. Whatever advantage the Spectre had, she decided to press on and force her superior opponent onto a retreat.

As John was slowly forced back to the edge of the ring, it was time for Shepard to spring her surprise. In quick motions, she was twirling across the ring. Using her superior flexibility, Jane pirouetted in the air and aimed a staggering kick at the Spartan's head. But he was faster, a slight duck and it was a clean miss. Shepard swore inwardly as she realised she overcommitted to her last attack, now it was her turn to go on the defensive.

The Spartan rained down blows on Shepard like a bird of prey. His attacks were precise and insanely fast, Shepard barely managed to block the punches. She needed to think up of something and fast, so she did the last thing her opponent would expect her to do—body slam.

Using biotics was probably cheating, but in a real combat situation, cheating is a foreign concept. Covered in a vibrant violet and blue shroud, Shepard slammed into the Spartan with as much force as possible, without killing him. Jane felt herself colliding into the Chief, her biotics disintegrating his shirt, but the moment she

touched his skin, most of the biotic field dissipated. And hence, a large portion of the kinetic energy lost. Still, it was more than enough to hurl both of them across the ring.

Pushing herself away from the Spartan, Shepard decided to increase the tempo of her stance; her fighting form began to mirror Capoeira more. Instead of punches, she led with spinning kicks. Realising the potential threat of biotics, John had resorted to take the Spectre on in closer proximity.

The Spartan-II increased the speed of his attacks, using his superior physical capabilities to his advantage. He was going to drawl out Shepard's strength, make her over commit into an attack, and then rain hell down on her. John swatted and brushed aside Jane's offensive moves, whilst closing in at the same time. Every time the Spectre had blocked one of her opponent's moves and prepared one of her own, there was always another attack waiting around the corner.

Jane feigned to her right, narrowly dodging a left jab. She grabbed the Chief's arm in the hopes of locking him, but he too had flexibility. The Spartan brought his right elbow around, forcing Shepard to release her grip and jump back. She knew her opponent was really planning his moves now, his mind worked faster than hers, making his attacks seemed as if they were choreographed the finest masters in existence. The execution was fluid and precisely, leaving no room for error.

In a desperate final attempt to win the spar, Shepard back flipped and cartwheeled to increase the distance between her and the Chief. But every time she moved, he was close behind. Realising it was now or never, Jane threw two biotic throws at John.

The first missile sailed under him as he somersaulted over it, and the second one just glanced off to the side. In one swift motion, Shepard found herself pinned to the floor and unable to move.

"Yield?" he asked. Even without his helmet, his voice was borderline unnaturally deep, especially for someone of his biological age.

"Yield," Jane abdicated. She felt the vice-like grip slacken, allowing her to move again.

"Bioticsâ€¦"

"Uh, uh!" Shepard interrupted, "you guys never said anything about biotics."

"They don't work on me."

"They seemed to work on your shirt though," Jane smirked, gesturing to the shreds of cloth that barely hung to his defined torso.

The two moved off to the side to get themselves cleaned up. Jane was covered in a layer of sweat which made her hair cling to her face. Grabbing her towel and burying her face into it, she was surprised by how soft it felt.

"That was damn impressive, Commander," Vega complimented, he then turned to John, "bet she wasn't a stretch for you though, no?"

"James!" Jane gasped in mock horror, "why so little in faith?"

"She wasn't too bad," John said.

"You hear that," Shepard said, pretending as if it was the highest praise in existence, "he said I wasn't too bad."

Naturally, this little joke managed to earn a few chuckles from her teammates.

Keyes came down from the observation post with a smile on his face.

"Good news, Shepard," the scientist began, "our scans show that you are adapting to your augmentations at a very fast rate. Your reaction time and the speed of your punches are one of the faster ones I've seen."

"So everything went well then?" Garrus asked.

"Yes everything went well," Keyes nodded, "you're all clear to go if you want to. Garrus, the _Normandy_ is fully retrofittedâ€|"

"Don't worry, I'm on the calibrations."

The group parted their separate ways for the time being. Jane departed for the showers in the hopes of getting a few extra minutes under the hot water.

Seeing that the lockers were vacant, Shepard threw her bag onto the bench and quickly disrobed. The steaming water rolled down her body, soothing the aches that she picked up from her extensive workout session.

Once satisfied with the small luxury, Jane donned on a fresh set of Alliance fatigues and walked back into the hall where a note awaited her. The handwriting was cursive and neat, extremely neat and consistent to be exact, almost as if it had been printed. _At Westminster Fields_, the note said, _find me if you need me_.

****XXxxxXX****

****UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, IN ORBIT OF INSTALLATION 12****

Lasky couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something inexplicably off. He had spent the past few days studying about the _new_ galaxy that had risen once the Coalition had gone into hiding. And to be honest, he wasn't very pleased. It seemed like scientific progress stagnated the moment a species got its hands on mass effect technology. Everything was imitative, not innovative.

What was even more disturbing was the politics. The entire system was filled with fundamental flaws. _Two wolves and a sheep deciding on what's for lunch_, Lasky thought. He never really considered himself as an extremist, or even right-wing for that matter. He was a

centralist, and had his concerns when the UNSC took over the duties of the CMA and UEG. So of course he was a clear advocate of democracy, and was absolutely joyful when Hood announced that the UNSC would relinquish emergency powers, and removed marshal law.

That being said, Thomas also did see the flaws of a democracy, and he knew that in times of war, soldiers should be running the show, not some half-wit politicians. To his dismay, the Council was exactly as he feared. Self-centred cowards who didn't have a clue in how to fight an enemy that was far superior.

Lasky did feel for Keyes and John who had to get wrapped up in the political shit-storm, even if it was for only an hour. But he truly felt sorry for Hackett, Shepard and Anderson, who had to deal with the Council on a regular basis.

Diplomacy works if both parties have an inclination towards it. Speculating on past trends, diplomacy is far from the Council's minds most of the time. Sure they were concerned about their own people's safety, but that doesn't give them any points when they decide to throw other species into the meat grinder and take the punishment for them.

_Krogan rebellions, well, that's what happens when you don't give the species some space, _Lasky pondered. _Okay, well, maybe the krogan are violent, but their females do reign in the males. And the genophage was too much._

In his heart of hearts, Thomas wasn't even too sure if he wanted to lead his men into hell, just to save a couple of species who will be anything but helpful in the long run. Humanity had its fair share of dealing with parasitic threats and political bullshit. The Coalition still has piracy, splinter factions and insurrectionism running rampant in the outer clusters.

Lasky was torn on the issue; he wanted to save as many innocent lives as possible, while at the same time, he was weary of dealing with incompetence.

"The armada will move in twelve hours sir," an Ensign said.

"Thank you," Lasky said, his mind clearly focusing on more prominent thoughts. _Let's hope this all works out in the end_.

****XXxxxXX****

****THE GREATER ARK, WESTMINSTER FIELDS****

Westminster Fields was renowned for its beautiful vista. The place would've become a prime real-estate location had it not been that the UEG decided that the place would be a memorial for those fallen. John could hear the gentle motions of the waves as they lapped onto the sandy beach below.

Annulment light waves had been generated in order to cancel or at least dull the artificial sun's intensity significantly. That was how the Installation had its day and night cycle.

With his enhanced eyes, the Spartan watched as the white caps of the wave's form, before spreading themselves across the beach. From off the shore, towering rock formations bent the currents as the rolled towards the land.

But then something unexpected happened, a thought that hadn't revealed itself for a very long time. His name! He remembered his _last_ name! He had never journeyed that far into the archives of his memories, but it was all right there. He remembered his name, his full name, John Neil Richards.

There was nothing _fancy_ about the name, but it did have an underlying meaning of sorts. And it made him feel, more human. He gazed at the grass to his left, before looking up into the cosmos, gazing across the Milky Way.

It was all so peaceful; it reminded him of his childhood, and his mother. Yes, he could remember his mother and father clearly now. He never had before, but now he could remember them as if it were yesterday. His mother's name was Emma Danielle Richards, a kind-hearted person with a warm personality. She had black hair and brown eyes, and she smelled like soap. John's father was Samuel Robert Richards, a jovial man with an excellent sense of humour. He had brown hair and blue eyes, and every Friday afterschool, Samuel would take John and Parsia out for a vanilla milkshake.

Vanilla milkshake, a childhood favourite that John realised he hadn't had for a very long time. As he probed deeper into the dark expanses, he could feel something trickle down his face. Bringing up his left hand to wipe away his cheek, he realised that it was his own blood. He was _crying_ out blood.

Looking at the crimson covered fingers, John could see the faintest tell-tale signs of the augmentation process. A normal human eye wouldn't be able to pick up on the scars, but up close, a Spartan could. There was only so much the nanites and Positronic lattices could do.

"_Do you ever wonder what's out there?" _he remembered asking when he was young.

"_Like what?" Kelly asked._

"_May be someone out there is wondering what's like here," John answered, revealing his brilliant mind at a young age._

"_I guess," Kelly mulled over, she at first she seemed uninterested in the topic, but it began to grow on her. "Do you think we'll ever meet them?"_

"_I hope so. Don't you?"_

John felt a tingling sensation wash over him as he thought about that starry night, so many years ago. He missed blue. And he missed _her_.

The soft footfalls quickly snapped John out of his deep thoughts, he could always tell whose footsteps those belonged too.

â€|

Gazing up at the night sky, he looked so at peace. After all he's been through; gazing across the vast cosmos comforted him. Jane couldn't help but feel a measure of happiness and joy for him. John never revealed anything personal about himself. But spending time with him, Jane managed to piece the truth together. She knew that he was bred to fight, to seek, and kill. John possessed a brilliant mind and an objective philosophy. Being in the military was not his career, it was his life.

When Shepard had first met the Spartan, she thought of him to be enigmatic, reserved, undeniably patient and calm. Hell, she would've bought it if he said he was a machine. He was so detached, just doing enough to get the job done well.

She could tell that he was tired of it all, weary of fighting. He never had a chance to live, never had the chance to experience the joys that he had saved. It was saddening, and more heartbreaking still to learn that he did his job without complaint, without wanting so much as a word of appreciation.

Jane wouldn't count herself as an emotional person, yet there was something relatable about John's story, something about him that just struck a chord deep within Shepard. They were both raised in the military, but Jane had a chance to experience the smallest of joys she took for granted, such as hugs and a blissful ignorance. John was shown the harsh reality of the world around him and its fragility. At a very young age, he had already accumulated scores of kills, while Jane had just finished High School.

Shepard expected some kind of resentment from the Spartan. But he showed no contempt, it just goes to show how mature, wise and albeit how weary he was.

Every day, he gets up and fights.

His neatly cut brown hair fluttered back and forth in the summer night breeze. The trees surrounding him seemed to move in the same tempo. He seemed so relaxed lying amongst the grass. It seemed almost cruel to interrupt him. Jane was just content to let him be.

She leaned against a tree trunk, somehow knowing that he would be here. Then again, she half-expected him to be here. Westminster Fields reminded Jane of a place where her mother would take her for a picnic annually. _I hope you're okay mom_.

Refocusing her attention on John, she wondered what he was thinking. She wondered what his full name was.

"John Neil Richards," she heard him whisper.

"Pardon?" Jane asked softly. She walked over the mound and eased herself onto the grass. Like her, John was wearing combat dress fatigues with the sleeves rolled up to just below his elbows.

"John Neil Richards, that was my name," he told her as she lay down on the soft greens.

Shepard couldn't understand why he was telling her this. _Isn't this classified information? Isn't he very loyal to the UNSC?_ Jane

pondered. Whatever the reasons to why he was telling her this, didn't really matter. What mattered was that he chose to tell her.

"It's got a nice ring to it," Jane smiled.

Gazing across the harbour, Jane could see where Fort Wall was. It was a few kilometres out from a dense CBD, which seemed to light up the horizon with its metropolitan lights. The place they were at, it was like the meeting grounds for nature and civilisation.

"I remember everything," John whispered.

"Remember what?" Jane asked, turning her head to face him. _I think I might be invading his personal space_.

John turned to face her, and even under the soft glow, she could see a very faint streak that was darker than tears. Instinctively, Jane reached out, and brushed her hand across his cheek. He did not flinch or bother to move out all. Shepard could tell that something was bothering him.

"Why is there blood on your face?" Shepard asked not bothering to hide her concern. She lifted herself gently onto her elbow to get a better angle on his face.

Silence.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it," Jane reassured.

John took in a deep breath, seeming to decide if he wanted to tell her the truth or not. "My life before the Spartan program," he finally answered.

Shepard wasn't too sure if she could hear a tone of regret in his voice. "Do you regret it?"

John mulled over the question. Did he really regret becoming a Spartan? Not really no. Halsey may have taken him away from his family, but in doing so she gave him a new life, a new family, and a future.

"No," he replied.

Jane frowned slightly; she was beginning to understand the position that John was in. Self-actualisation is key towards making a perfect soldier, a clandestine master. Albeit having self-actualisation had its _drawbacks_ on Supersoldiers, it made them susceptible to battle stress. But this was not battle stress alone, it was something more, like an age old weariness that never seems to fade away.

"I miss them," John said finally.

Would I call him a friend? Yes, I've known him for a year, Jane thought. In all the time that the two spent talking to each other, not once had the mentioned about their deepest concerns. John was calm, collective and quiet by nature; he never told Jane anything personal about him, until now.

"Who?" Jane asked, she very well understood the magnitude of trust the Spartan had placed on her.

"Friends, family, Sam and _Kelly_," John answered.

"Sam and Kelly?" Shepard asked, noticing the slight emphasis he put on Kelly's name.

"They were the first friends I made after entering the program."

Jane remembered the names that had been inscribed in the museum. She knew that Sam was the first Spartan-II lost in the war against the Covenant. And Kelly, she died in the Fall of Earth, along with many other Spartans. But realising how close John was to his Spartan brothers and sisters, it painted him in a new light for Shepard.

"How close were you two?" the Spectre asked, at some point in the following months after they met, the two Commanders didn't need to be literal in order to know what the other was saying.

"When we got some down time, Kelly and I would just lie under the stars and watch."

The value of this gesture, the fact that he was watching the stars, it made him seem more human in Jane's eyes. But more importantly, he was sharing this moment with her.

Jane looked down at his arms, and noticed very thin lines. She hadn't noticed them before, but realised that they were scars. They were too _neat_ to have been gained in combat; she knew it was the augmentation process. It made some part of her cringe, though she understood the necessity of it, and the desperate need of the program.

A small buzzing sound came from John's pocket, prompting him to fish a rectangular device out of his pocket. Although AR glasses were extremely handy, Smartphones still remained in popular demand because of their longer battery life and superior processing power, also, they didn't require AR gloves or neural sync interface to be used.

John looked at the brief message sent to him and spoke. "The order's been given, we're moving out."

Jane felt a sense of elation as a great weight seemed to have been taken off her, the tide of the war is turning.

****XXxxXX****

****MAGELLANIC CLOUDS (COALITION HELD SPACE)****

The armada was breathtakingly huge. Carrier Strike Groups moved through the abyss in perfect formation, and at the front of every UNSC Fleet, was a Keyship, leading the way. Every single vessel was elegant, streamlined and seamless, the culmination of centuries of research and refining.

Sangheili ships were bulbous and sleek, retaining the designs that had transcended through the ages. It was time for them again to join

their human friends in a greater struggle.

****XXxxxXX****

"_I've been to the Lesser Ark, once or twice. I heard that the surrounding clusters are up for grabs between ONISAD and Innies."_

Admiral Thomas Lasky to Air Chief Marshal Gary Weiss

****XXxxxXX****

****A/N: Hey guysâ€|****

****Quick questions, do you think I've made Shepard human enough yet?**

>Second question, does John seem more human now?
Third question, what did you think of the name I gave him?*

****Please review****

27. Foxtrotted

****A/N:****

****Oh god! Why!? JJ you were so young, so much to live forâ€| so much Ayshuness to doâ€| More sobbing Oh well, at least you died with honour, death by sword.****

â€|

****To Eipok, it's a stealth ship, what happened was a case of EXTREME bad luckâ€| Bad luck Brian was on board at the time.****

****And heyâ€| I luv the Grunts. We're going to say that these fellas are the ones in Halo 1, (cause they're the cutest. They lost all their cuteness in Halo 3).****

â€|

****To Fayneir****

****I totally agree with you. I had a heart attack when I learnt that Karen Traviss was going to write *_**Glasslands**_*. Granted her work contributions in *_**Evolutions**_* was good. But reading the blurb on the back of the book and realising that she was the author, wellâ€| yeah.****

****Wasn't too fond of the fact that she decided to introduce a Sangheili Splinter Group and have ONI back them up. (No matter, I can use this to my advantageâ€| somewhat). But it seems that 343 are using this to their advantage so I'll let this one slide.****

****However, I couldn't really forgive her with the Star Wars Republic Commando series. *_**Hard Contact**_* and *_**Triple Zero**_* were good, but I felt that she was making the Jedi look the bad guys. It was quite illogical. I fear the same for the Halo novels she's**

written, hence I'm still apprehensive about reading
Glasslands****, which I've bought a few months back.**

But Gregg Bear, I like himâ€¦ it's just I realised I could've capitalised on so much more had I found out about the expansion in lore earlier.

XXxxXX

"_M448-TML Launcher is designed as a universal heavy weapon support system in dense environments. The magazine holds three missiles, allowing the operator to create a devastating shockwave and pressure effect on the targeted area. The missiles are high velocity and have on-board computers to aid in neutralising air and ground targets."_

-UNSC M448-TML manual

XXxxXX

SSV **_NORMANDY SR-2**_**, IN SLIPSPACE**

To say that Jane was impressed with how her ship was outfitted was an understatement, and to say how Joker was impressed and grateful towards the UNSC, was the understatement of the millennium.

"Can you believe, Commander? When you were getting upgraded, I was too!" the Flight Lieutenant said joyfully. Seeing him standing in the CIC rather than sitting in the cockpit was somewhat of a surprise.

Shepard had never seen Joker move excessively before, but now, he was so animated. He still moved cautiously, but he was enjoying the gifts of being able to move without fear of breaking a bone.

"Doctor Catherine Halsey, nice person," Jeff continued, "She said that she was going to inject nanites into my body, which would strengthen my bones. I'm effectively, Vrolik Syndrome free!"

"Nice to see you happy," Shepard smiled. "So, are you going to work out at the gym or what?"

"Me? Workout? Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Commander. I want to enjoy the benefits of being on a disability register, which I haven't had the chance to reap yet."

"What, EDI?" Jane smirked.

Joker raised his hands, "no comment."

"So what do you think of the new _Normandy_?" Shepard asked.

"It's big, that's for starters," Joker began, "EDI ran through a couple of simulations, she says the ship will handle even better than it did before. And the new teeth, that's something. I'd like to see what the guns would do to a Reaper."

"Well, after we stop by the Citadel, you can take shot at the Reapers if you want," Jane encouraged.

"The Council's gonna flip when they see the Coalition, aren't they?"

"You betcha."

"They're going to be like whinny bitches. Demanding the Coalition to hand over tech, blah, blah, blah," Jeff mocked.

"Wouldn't be surprised," Shepard said, "don't think the UNSC would give up their knowledge that easily. After all they've been through and what that galaxy has shown, I'm surprised that they were going to come and help us."

"Wouldn't blame them if they decided to just stay put and watch the galaxy burn," Joker said, "they'veâ€¦ we've been through a lot of shit."

Shepard immediately picked up on Joker's shift in tone. "I can see some cracks on you, a bit of wear and tear," she then raised her hands, "no pun intended."

"I've got family, who I haven't heard from in a while," Joker frowned.

"Hey, you'll see them soon enough."

"Well, thanks for the talk, Commander, better get back to it," Joker said, and with that, he left for the helm.

"Commander?" Traynor called.

"Yes?"

"The Salarian Councillor would like to speak to you on vidcom."

"Thanks Traynor."

Shepard promptly left the bridge and headed into the hallway. Having been retrofitted to the extreme, the Normandy had increased in size significantly. It now had hallways, checkpoints and sealable areas. The ship had six levels now. Function Room and Captain's Cabin on the uppermost level; CiC, Cockpit, Delegation Facilities/War Room on the second floor; Cabins, Mess hall, Lounge Room (Observations Deck), AI-Core, Medical Wing and XO quarters on the third floor; weapons calibration, life-support, shooting range and gymnasium on the fourth level; Engineering, waste-disposal and Reactor core on the fifth floor; and finally, hangar bay and armoury on the sixth floor.

To the Spectre, she was literally flying a cruiser, but to the UNSC it was a Stealth Destroyer.

Entering the communications room, Shepard entered a few keys, and the Salarian Councillor appeared on the HD holoprojector.

"Commander Shepard, there is a sensitive topic I would like to discuss with you," he said with urgency in his voice.

"What is it?"

"I have reason to believe that Councillor Udina is working with Cerberus."

"That's a pretty damning accusation," Shepard frowned. She didn't like Udina much, but this seemed a bit too extreme. "Do you have any evidence for this?"

"My best STG team brought me this information. Meet me in my office when you're at the Citadel. Preferably immediately."

"I will," Shepard said, "and I have back up too."

With that, the link was terminated. _Better go tell John about this_, Jane thought, _he'll probably be in the hangar bay_.

â€

John paced back and forth on the deck, wearing his upgraded MJOLNIR armour. He watched as First Lieutenant James "Rook" Daniels and another Spartan-IV, Second Lieutenant Andrew "Wizard" Thompson, work on a warthog, adding extra armour plating and armaments to the already fearsome vehicle. Of course, they were getting additional help from a Huragok, or an Engineer, which the two former Helljumpers have affectionately called, Bubbles.

The Chief had found Thompson to be a kind, comical person, much like Will. Andrew also seemed to have an uncanny ability with machines, both hardware and software, probably why he was given the call sign "Wizard".

"Hey, where'd doc go?" Wizard asked, referring to Keyes.

"He's with other doc," Rook answered, "T'soni."

"Oh, I see," Wizard said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Dude! Don't cross that line," Rook said in mock disgust.

"Haha," Wizard chuckled, "no wonder you have no girlfriend."

"That's because I have a wife!" Rook retorted.

"Apply cold water to burned area!" Shepard called out as she entered the hangar. Her small joke seemed to get a light hearted chuckle out of all the crewmen in the vicinity.

"Nice one Lola!" James cheered.

"Hey Bubbles, could you pass me the wrench?" Rook aside.

The Engineer chirped as it picked up the tool with its tentacles and handed it to the Lieutenant.

"Thanks Bubbles."

Turning to face John, Jane's voice dropped to a hush. "Could I talk to you for a quick second?" She asked, gesturing towards a secluded.

"Okay," John nodded, "times up!"

It took a moment for Jane to process the joke. Coming from the Chief, it made the joke all the more hilarious.

"Ass," Jane sighed, albeit smiling.

Upon reaching the work bench in the far corner, Shepard leaned against the bench, while John remained standing.

"Look, I've received word that Udina might've turned traitor. The Salarian Councillor said that he had evidence to prove it."

John frowned, "people get killed over that kind of information. If Udina's turned traitor, there will be an attack on the Citadel."

"I know," Jane agreed, "that's why when we get there, I'll need your people prepped and ready to go."

"You got it."

****XXxxxXX****

****EARTH, LONDON, BRITAIN****

"Get up! Get up!" Arca roared.

In an instant, Greystone was already pulling on his helmet and checking his weapons. Heavy rounds streaked through the air, raining hell wherever they landed.

"What's going on?" Greystone asked.

"Reapers are pushing against our pos! We gotta move!"

Lotus quickly rounded up the team's equipment that was stacked neatly beside the hotel room's dining table, and tossed them to his teammates.

"So what's the plan?" Greystone asked.

"Cover the civilians, then we'll bang out," Arca answered.

The team jumped out of the gaping wound in the wall, and used their glider packs to land safely onto the ground. Gunfire and exploding rounds assaulted the auditory systems as Fifth Element moved towards the Command Post.

"Fhajad, how bad?" Arca asked.

The battered Spartan-II turned to answer, "We're holing at the northern and western lines, but the east is taking a beating. I need you guys to go there and help out. I'll come join you as soon as I can."

"No, you stay here and make sure the leadership doesn't die," Arca said, referring to Anderson.

"Alright then," Fhajad nodded, "I want you guys on a transport the moment we've got everyone away."

"You got it."

Arca led his team through a few alleyways and checkpoints before reaching the frontlines. Since the ground had been torn up by earlier battles, Alliance and UNSC soldiers had dug up some fortifications, allowing them to hold back the Reaper horde. Allied casualties had been taken away for evacuation, while the Reapers were left to rot where they lay. No one wanted to add more to the Reaper's numbers if it could be helped.

Fifth Element sprinted across the street and into a supermarket where Lieutenant Devonshire was. A few stray rounds had struck their shields, signifying how much resources the Reapers were willing to commit to wipe out organised resistance.

"Good you guys made it," the ODSI CO said, "the Reapers are tearing us a new asshole here."

"Sounds nasty," Lotus muttered.

"So what's the plan then?" Alison asked.

"We'll help ease up the pressure," Arca answered, "The moment the Reapers slacken, I want you to pull your people back."

"Okay, good luck guys."

Leaving the store, Arca scanned the battlefield. The UNSC and Alliance had the advantage of the environment, but the Reapers had the numbers. Any meat grinder can become jammed if enough meat is crammed into it.

"Greystone, find a crow's nest and cover us."

The Operative complied and made his way to a roof top with a sniper team. Arca and Lotus on the other hand, moved towards the trenches. The unmistakable roar of the M888D HMG filled the air as the gun scythed down countless Reaper combatants.

For as far as the eye could see, remains of enemy soldiers litter the street like leaves in autumn. The lone Atlas tank and three badgers assigned to this sector, rolled back and forth, providing fire support where it was most needed.

"Would be nice if we had a few Walkers with us," Lotus commented, "Haven't piloted a Cyclops for a long time."

"Titan's better," Arca added, "more firepower."

"But it can't bludgeon something to death. It can only curb stomp like the Mantis."

"Why grab when you can just burn?" Arca rebutted as he grabbed a Plasma Projector and an M448-TML Launcher from the weapon stockpile.

The COMs crackled, it was Greystone. "I'm with a couple of sharpshooters on the rooftop; we've got a shitload of brutes and harvesters on the way."

"Shit," Lotus swore.

"Concentrate on the harvesters, I want them wiped out before they get in range," Arca ordered.

"Copy."

In quick successions, three Epirus sniper rifles opened up, slinging a salvo of thermobaric shells at the flying menaces. Gore and tech rained down on the London streets as the harvesters spiralled out of the night sky. Flashes of brilliant red indicated the deaths of each demonic bird.

Slapping in a fresh clip, Greystone shifted his fire towards the Oculi. The flying orbs screeched through the air, their crimson red tongue licking hungrily against the defenders. Pulling the trigger repeatedly, a couple of the Oculi exploded in a brilliant fireball. The rounds had penetrated the armour before detonated, literally scrambling the insides.

But with all the firepower they had at their disposal, dozens of Reapers units managed to wreak havoc on the Allied lines.

One brute got a little too close to the trenches, forcing Arca to break cover and burn the creature. The myriad of violet and blue flame spewed out and consumed the horrid flesh. The brute roared in pain as it was literally boiled away. Only glass and molten metal remained where it once stood.

"Lotus, with me," Arca ordered, "we'll use the buildings and flank them."

"Shit, that's crazy," Lotus breathed, "I'm in."

The two Operatives pulled away from the trenches and climbed to whatever was left of the rooftops. Running along the rubble, they had to contend with marauders taking pot-shots at them. Thankfully though, every few minutes an Osprey would swoop in guns blazing. The mounted M888D Turrets fired at an incredible rate that made it seem as if it was a continuous beam weapon. Cobalt blue beams cleaved through anything that it touched. Marauders were being cut in half while their weapons were still firing.

Crimson red beams began to lick hungrily at the ground as the Reapers roared overhead. Arca flicked on his COM and started barking orders.

"Lieutenant Devonshire, come in. Lieutenant!"

Greystone's voice broke through the public COM channels instead. "Arca, the Lieutenant is KIA, I repeat, the LT is KIA. We're taking heavy casualties back here. I'm cut off from the main force. Making my way to you now."

"Copy that, we'll hunker down and wait for you," Arca said before switching COM channels, "Fhajad, come in."

"Fhajad here," the Spartan-II replied, "sit rep."

"The eastern front has taken heavy losses. We're cut off from you

guys. Cut our loses and bang out, I'll get my guys and meet up with you later."

There was a pause on Fhajad's end, probably he was deciding if he should leave his friends behind.

"We'll be fine Fhajad," Arca reassured.

"Alright, get back in one piece, Fhajad out."

****XXxxXX****

"_Simulations have shown that Hunters are extremely effective at fighting Flood outbreaks. Their lack of a central nervous system makes it impossible for the parasites to convert them. As always, we've capitalised on this aspect, and upgraded the Hunters' weaponry and armour. They are now definitions of walking tanks. Their main gun is a joint combination of an unguided cannon and a plasma thrower."_

Doctor Delilah Abigail Orton, presenting the Hunter's new combat capabilities with Sangheili Scientist V'tar Dartun

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: The Grunty thirst claims us allâ€|****

****Please review****

28. The Coup: Part 1

****A/N:****

****To ReannaExplosion, thanks! =D****

â€|

****Karen, what are you doing? Karen what u do? KAREN STAHP!****

****Thank you to those who told me the *_**"spoilers"*_** to Glasslands. I'm not being sarcastic here, I really do thank you. You guys have saved me a lot of grief from reading that book. (Now, how to get my money back). ****

****I have to wonder what Frank O'Connor feels about this. They should've gotten Nylund in to write this. Hell, I would've paid \$100 if Nylund (or Joe Staten, or William C. Dietz) was writing this, but he's (they're) notâ€| and that makes me sadâ€| I think I might need to go see a professional.****

****Overall, looking at the reviews and knowing what Traviss has done in the past, I must say, it will be very difficult for me to even consider buying *_**The Thursday War**_**. ****

****XXxxXX****

"_Compared to the remaining S-Twos, Fhajad's a nice guy to be around

with. The Chief? Well, he's the strong silent type. Kinda makes me feel uncomfortable, not knowing what's behind that visor."

Commander Sarah Palmer

XXxxXX

CERBERUS CRUISER, **_DANTE**_

â€|

_**Incoming CommuniquÃ©
>Priority: High_

_Commence attack. Neutralise the Council. Full authorisation of actions deemed necessary.
>**â€|**

"Oxide, let's move," said Carbon, the team leader.

The young operative gave a quick nod as he picked up a Cerberus Harrier, and checked the clip.

"I thought they were going to call this off," Oxide said, "Intel says that there's an armada coming."

"That's why we go now, or we'll never get the chance," Carbon replied.

"Sounds risky."

"When is not?" Carbon asked, picking up extra clips for his Harrier.

"Jammers are up, let's hit them while they're blind," Ozone said, shouldering a Black Widow sniper rifle.

Oxide made rounds to make sure his team's armour was secure; he made sure that his optics goggles were fastened over his left eye, and gave his chest a pat. The dull grey armour gave a low thud, indicating that it was still good.

The team moved through the white hallways of the Cerberus vessel, and into the hangar bay. Every vessel participating in the attack, was unmarked, and made to look like refugees. With the massive influx of civilians every day, C-Sec would be overly taxed by workload, giving Cerberus the advantage of surprise.

With the diversionary force dressed in mercenary garbs, C-Sec would diverge its attention on the docks, allowing the more heavily armoured Cerberus forces to take C-Sec HQ and the Embassies by surprise.

"I'm not too comfortable about doing this," Oxide whispered over the TEAMCOM.

"None of us are," Carbon reassured.

Boarding a grey shuttle, Ozone banged on the side doors, signalling

for the pilot to take them in. Vessels of various classifications moved towards their designated areas, while the teams inside waited for the signal.

"Group One has made it to the refugee docks," Carbon said, peering out of the windows.

"Group Two and Three are waiting at the wards."

Oxide sat on the bench, listening to the COM chatter of Group One. He could hear the doors hiss on the other end, followed by heavy gunfire.

"Get moving!" a squad leader ordered in his raspy voice.

Carbon decided to broadcast the COMs through the shuttle's speakers, allowing the team to hear. Gunfire and screams competed for dominance. Group One was firing indiscriminately at anyone in their path. The thump of the heavy machine guns provided a clue to what the carnage would be like.

"Oxide, get on the gun," Carbon ordered.

"Copy," Oxide complied.

The dual-autocannons unfolded and locked into position, the moment the doors open, Oxide would fill the air with heavy explosive rounds.

"C-Sec is responding," Ozone informed, "Group Two is moving in now."

The next wave of Cerberus marked ships appeared, and engaged the meagre defence fleet guarding the Citadel.

Frigates were the first to move in. Cerberus light capital ships opened fire on the unsuspecting Turian Battlegroup. Oxide watched as shields flared and winked out of existence. The defence fleet attempted to fire back, but the Cerberus frigates were already moving, forcing the Turian frigates to break formation and engage in a savage dogfight.

A small Alliance Battlegroup on the other side of the Citadel came around to assist the struggling Turians. Things seemed to even out for the defenders as the lone Alliance Cruiser began to unleash its firepower. A Cerberus frigate was unlucky enough to be caught dead in front of the Alliance ships, its shields offered little protection for the crew as the ship was torn asunder.

With the attack looking like it was going to fail, Cerberus Cruisers arrived, and caught the unsuspecting allied fleet off guard. The lead cruisers opened fire with their main guns, ripping through the weakened shields, before delivering the killing blow with a salvo of missiles.

Dante moved in, and led the attack from the front. Her main cannon fired non-stop, slinging heavy slugs at terrifying speeds. The Alliance Cruiser identified as Mombasa, barely managed to survive the onslaught, and turned to engage Dante head on.

Oxide guessed that the Captain in command of Mombasa knew that the odds of winning were zero, which was why the Cruiser began to charge forward at full speed. Escape pods began to disperse from the fireship, only to be swept away by escorting fighters.

"Kai Leng is already moving," Ozone said, gesturing to four shuttles descending on the embassies.

"Fucking glory hound," Carbon muttered, "we'll hold here until we've been given the order."

Dante zeroed in on the Alliance vessel, but without aid from other Cerberus shuttles, Mombasa wouldn't be destroyed in time. Dante slowed down, in the hope that the accompanying ships will bypass, and help destroy the suicidal Alliance ship. But it wasn't enough; Mombasa rammed Dante at full speed. By far, the Alliance cruiser was heavier than her Cerberus counterpart.

Like dust shaken from a book, debris spewed into the blackness of space. Mombasa continued on firing with whatever she had left. Both ships managed to compromise on another's reactor core, the resulting explosion was tremendous, as it had caused the remaining Cerberus Cruisers to shudder.

Carbon whistled at the display of naval tact, before returning his sights onto the Citadel. Apparently stray rounds from the Cerberus strike group had caused pockets of heavy damage, but it didn't matter, so long as the embassies were relatively unscathed, then Cerberus's takeover would be smooth and quick. The Council would be assassinated, and no one would be none the wiser—save for the people soon to be dead.

A green light began to pulse in the cabin, signalling Group Three to deal the final hand. The shuttle hummed as it banked left and begun its approach.

"Prep the doors," Carbon ordered.

Ozone nodded, and placed his hand on the hatch.

"We're taking enemy fire from the ground," the pilot said as the rounds smashed against the canopy.

The lead shuttle hovered beside a balcony, offloading troops before heading back to the ships. A couple of troopers were picked off by enemy fire, before the squad managed to gain a foothold.

A group of phantoms that had gone in with Leng earlier, moved along the maintenance catwalks, and with a quick slash from their swords, the snipers fell.

Oxide felt himself tense up as the doors opened; he was forced to duck behind the gun's covers as a wave of arms fire swept through the cabin. The accompanying nemesis ducked behind the safety of the doors and readied their sniper rifles.

"Pull that trigger so they don't get back up!" Carbon roared.

Clenching his fingers, Oxide felt the gun thump as it unleashed a

stream of heavy fire. C-Sec guards toppled over as the rounds bore gaping holes through their bodies, or tearing them apart. Tiles were ripped up from the floor as the explosive detonated, showering the defenders with shrapnel.

Once the main landing was clear, Atlas mechs dropped in, and lead the charge.

"Pilot, move us to the Council's escape shuttle," Carbon ordered.

"Let's hope those coordinates Udina gave us is correct," Ozone muttered.

The shuttle pulled away from the landing zone, and soared towards the restricted embassy areas.

"C-Sec, closing in on us!" Ozone alerted.

"Get on the second gun," Carbon ordered.

Ozone nodded as he mounted the left gun. Both turrets extended from the safety of the cabin, allowing the operators to have 180 degrees vision of fire.

The lead C-Sec squad care was caught dead centre by Ozone. The windshields were splattered with blood and gore before the entire vehicle was belching out smoke, and spiralling out of control into the Presidium.

After suffering heavy casualties, the remaining squad cars were forced to break off.

"I've got eyes on the evac shuttle," Oxide said.

"Make sure it doesn't fly again," Carbon said.

"Copy." Oxide's gun roared as it hurled the explosive rounds into the Alliance shuttle.

The evac transport winced and exploded into a huge fireball.

"The Council is trapped here now, let's go hunting!"

Carbon raised his COM and alerted Group Three reserves. "This is Three-One-Actual, we've eliminated the Council's evac shuttles. C-Sec is retreating."

"Copy that Three-One-Actual, Three-Two has finished up, they're moving to your pos right now."

"Roger."

A few moments later, a few more Cerberus shuttles joined 3-1.

"Sir, sensors are picking up movement, two-hundred metres up ahead," the Co-pilot said.

"Get us there."

"Yes sir."

The four Kodiaks formed a single file, and combed alongside the Presidium. Carbon ordered a few shuttles to drop off their chanks in order to create an inescapable vice.

"I've got eyes on the Council!" Oxide yelled.

****XXxxXX****

****CITADEL, EMBASSIES****

Thane Krios dug into his heels as he sprinted up the staircase. The final stage of Kepral syndrome has taken its toll, for the Drell had difficulty breathing. Every time he vaulted over an obstacle, his muscles would tingle and ache.

His soft heels touched the grey tiles, barely making a sound as he passed a Cerberus patrol. He needed to get to a communication relay, or the Citadel will fall. But the Drell wasn't at his best, and was spotted by a phantom.

"Get him!" she ordered.

Krios levelled his Phalanx pistol and fired at the troops. Cerberus combatants fell back as the pistol rounds drilled straight through their head, spraying blood and brain matter on the floor behind them. A lone nemesis hid behind a juice bar, waiting for the perfect chance to strike.

Thane had to commend her abilities as he was forced to throw himself behind a table as a bullet crashed into wall where his head was once in front of. Krios rose from cover again, and used his biotic abilities to crush the sniper against the wall. A satisfying clatter from her rifle indicated that her chest had caved in as the counter steamrolled over her.

The Drell had let a small smile form across his lips, even half dead, he still had most of his touch. Thane's shields sparked as the remaining phantom advanced on him with her palm blasters. In an unexpected move, Krios cartwheeled to the left, and threw a warp missile at the ninja on speed.

A violet field enshrouded the phantom, quickly chipping away at her health and armour. She attacked the Drell with her sword, but hit nothing but air.

Thane knew that he had to end this fight quickly; his sickly body could not keep up much longer. And within a few bouts, he held the phantom in a headlock.

"Be at peace," he whispered, before yanking her head violently.

The phantom's body dropped lifelessly onto the cold floor, giving Thane some respite. After recollecting his breath, he grabbed her sword, and the nemesis's sniper rifle.

It was time to move into the maintenance corridors to find a COM channel that hasn't been jammed.

â€|

Perfect, just absolutely fucking perfect, Ash thought as she led the Council away from the escape pad._ Where the fuck is Valern? I hope Thane finds a fucking COM soon._

She had just witnessed a heavily muscled up shuttle rip the evac transport to shreds before heading her way. Now the newly appointed Spectre had to get the Council away from the advancing Cerberus soldiers.

Udina's quite calm, Williams pondered.

Without a moments warning, the Lieutenant Commander heard the unmistakable sound of a Kodiak Transport.

"Get down!" she barked.

Udina and Tevos threw themselves behind a wall; the Asari Councillor used her biotic abilities to cast a protective barrier around the small group. But Sparatus, the Turian Councillor wasn't fast enough.

The group watched in horror as Sparatus was turned into pulp. The heavy chatter of the gun didn't stop there, as it swung to face the Council members and chip away the wall.

"Goddess help us," Tevos whispered.

And it looked like her prayers were answered. A heavily damaged contingent of Turian and Alliance wings swooped in and racked up the shuttles. The lead Kodiak with the menacing guns wobbled before crashing into the lower levels.

Ash breathed heavily as she leaned against the wall. Death had almost claimed her, and she was glad that he didn't. But the interlude was short lived as the Cerberus chawks reached them and opened fire.

"Fuck!" Williams swore.

She raised her pistol and fired a few rounds down range. One of the bullets caught a Cerberus trooper in the throat, causing him to thrash about until he bled out.

Ash spotted a couple of M8-Avenger Rifles belonging to a squad of fallen Alliance soldiers. She quickly picked those weapons and tossed them to the Councillors.

Tevos seemed to know what she was doing. The Asari Councillor slapped in a fresh thermal clip, and picked off a squad of Cerberus troops with a few bursts. Williams smiled inwardly, after having a newfound respect for the politician. Likewise for Udina, Ash may not have liked him, but at least he knew how to handle himself. He wasn't cowering in a corner, curled up in a foetal position. He was up on his feet, fighting. But even though the Councillors knew how to shoot a gun, didn't mean that they could fight their way out.

The COMs began to squawk, Ash was hesitant to answer it.

"Lieutenant Commander Williams?" it was a woman's voice, "this is Major Licil of the Asari Commandos, we're with Spectre Agent Gathal and are moving towards your position right now."

Relief flooded through Ash, she wasn't alone in this fight. "Copy that Major Licil, we'd appreciate it if you would get her on the double."

"Copy that, we're coming."

...

When the attack had happened, Lieutenant Laral didn't believe the reports flooding in. Cerberus had launched a station wide surprise attack, wiping out anyone in their way. From what she had gathered, the refugee docks were in tatters.

On the orders of Major Licil, Laral, and her group of Commandos were ordered to go and make sure that there weren't any survivors from the crashes. Easy enough, she and her squad wanted to get some revenge on the bastards that tore up the embassies foyer.

Laral led her team through the apartments and arrived at an expansive balcony, where the fire sprinklers had kicked in. In the middle of the lake were the remnants of two Kodiaks, obviously no one could've survived that.

But the two on the balcony, now there definitely could've been survivors from that, the heavily armed Kodiak that was mentioned earlier, lay on its left side, it's turret a twisted wreck.

"Move up slowly," Laral ordered.

Her team of seven Asari fanned out and encircled the downed vessel. The crashing of metal alerted the team that someone was still alive, and armed. What Laral saw next shocked her to very core. A grey armoured figure, with a matte black visor, sporting Cerberus livery, appeared. Smoke curled up from his armour, giving him an absolutely menacing look. But what he wielded shocked everyone entirely. It was one of the sideguns on the shuttle.

"Take cover!" Laral roared.

In just a span of a few seconds, two of her squad members were already killed, reduced to nothing but a smouldering corpse.

"Kill that fucker!" Laral bellowed. She broke cover and like the rest of her squad, threw powerful biotic attacks at him. But he only staggered under the impact before blasting away at their positions again.

"Who is this guy!" an Asari Sergeant said. There was absolutely no way a Krogan could wield a heavy gun that easily, let alone a human.

"There's another one coming out!" A private spotted.

Another one? Laral thought, _Goddess help us!_

The second Operative was wielding a Cerberus Harrier, with

devastating effect. He managed to bring down a Commando's shields before finishing her off with a headshot.

The remaining Commando's began to grow desperate, never before had they been up against someone like this. They weren't use to being pinned, they preferred to use hit and run tactics.

"We'll hit the heavy in three," Laral ordered. Each of her sisters in arms prepared themselves. "One, two, three!"

In a heartbeat, the remaining four Asari hurled themselves in a biotic charge at the Cerberus Special Forces. Laral winced as she felt her biotic field disperse before she had hit her target. Everything else that followed after was such a blur.

Her sergeant was the next one to be killed, as she received a punch straight to her face. Her head just disintegrated under the impact. One by one, her squad was killed with brutal efficiency until she was the last one left.

The heavy towered over her, hell, the two Cerberus Operatives towered over Krogans. She felt the iron grip of the Operative as he grabbed her by the neck. She could feel the blood of her sisters rubbing against her skin.

"What are you?" she choked.

Without even a moment's notice, she was looking down the barrel of a pistol.

Goddess be praised.

****XXxxXX****

"Ah fuck that hurt," Ozone groaned. His sniper rifle was horribly twisted in the crash, and it looked like the nemesis snipers weren't in any better shape.

"Here, take this," Carbon said, handing him a spare Harrier. "C'mon, the Council is only a few levels up."

"Let's move before more arrives," Oxide said, dropping the spent turret.

"Alright, coming," Ozone breathed.

"Anything broken?" Carbon asked.

"Just a bit knocked about, s'all."

The team quickly grabbed whatever they could, and sprinted into the building. The fire sprinklers washed off the blood and ash off of their armour, making them look relatively new again.

Carbon scanned the surroundings with his optics, "on me," he said.

"Looks like they've got backup," Oxide said, as he a squad of Commandos rally to the Councillors.

"Well, at least you got the Turian Councillor," said Ozone.

"Remember, watch your fire," Carbon warned, "We don't want to hit Udina."

"Solid copy," Ozone and Oxide said.

Moving through the stairway, the group came upon the chalks they had dropped off earlier. Most of the Cerberus troops were now smears of blood on the tiled floor.

"Looks like they didn't do too well against the Commandos," Ozone commented.

"They couldn't have gotten far," Carbon said, "it's still open season."

****XXxxxXX****

****SERPENT NEBULA, CITADEL****

It seemed as if a blackbody rip, tore itself into existence in the fabric of space. And out of the void, the UNSC Sol Fleet and Sangheili Fleet of Unyielding Benevolence appeared. Flanked by two destroyers, the Normandy banked to port as it headed towards the Citadel docks.

Coalition ships maintained minimal distance in order to appear non-hostile. The violet glow of the nebula rained upon the Sangheili ships, making them look like the spirits of the great abyss.

Magnificent, was all that Shepard could think.

"Commander, we have a situation up here," Joker said over the COMs.

"Copy that."

Shepard quickly sprinted out of the officer's lounge and into the Cockpit. She found that John was already waiting for her there too.

"What do we have?" Shepard asked.

"A message," the Spartan-II answered.

Jane could hear COM static, it sounded as if the signal was being jammed.

"Patching up the signal, Commander," EDI said.

"Shepard?" it was Thane. His breathing was a bit laboured, something the static couldn't hide.

"Thane?" Jane said with a concerned tone, "are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Commander. Cerberus has attacked the Citadel. Most of the defence force has been wiped out. Spectre Agent Lieutenant Commander

Ashley Williams is with the Council. I've been told to go find the Valern, the Salarian Councillor."

"Alright. Stay safe Thane, we're coming in."

Over the public channels, Jane could hear Fleet Admiral Hood issuing orders. UNSC Prowlers had rooted out the hiding Cerberus fleet, and were now taking care of things.

"Let's get groundside," Shepard said, beckoning the Chief to follow her.

Upon reaching the armoury, Jane pulled out her armour from the locker, pulled the privacy curtains, and donned her armour on. The seams of the bodysuit merged together, allowing Shepard to attach the armour plates on.

"Woah, Lola," James smirked, "be careful or someone will die just looking at you."

"And that's why you're single," Shepard grinned.

"Oh! Burn!" Thompson hollered. The dirty blond haired Spartan-IV eased his helmet; there was an audible hiss as the airlocks snapped into place. "Is it normal for junior officers to hit on senior officers, here?"

"He's cute, that's why I let him get away with it."

"Can't make blush twice using the same thing Lola," Vega chuckled.

"She made you blush?" Thompson asked.

"Yes she did," Cortez chipped in.

"Oh how did Mister Vega ever recover from such a blow, to his friggin ego?" Andrew said poetically.

"Alright, enough talk boys, let's get groundside," Shepard ordered.

From afar as John slid on his helmet, he noticed that Jane used humour to ease the nerves of the people under her command.

"Coming John?" Shepard asked over their private COM channel.

"Coming."

Cortez gunned the Greyhawk's engines and piloted the stealth transport towards the Presidium. Outside of the viewport, John could see Albatross Heavy Cargo Dropships and Ospreys move in on the Citadel. The Albatrosses soared over the wards, dropping in ODSTs, while the Marines rode in on the Ospreys.

"Are the others going to join us?" Shepard asked, referring to the other Coalition races.

John looked at Donnie to answer his question.

"Yes," came the answer.

As the Greyhawk glided silently through the embattled Presidium, Shepard could see Cerberus forces wiping out entire Allied units. Elites dropped into the battlefield first, taking a couple of phantoms by surprise. The towering aliens ignited their plasma sword, and lunged forward with surprising speed. Cerberus forces were cut down where they stood as the violet plasma blade boiled away their armour and burned through flesh.

Grunts jumped from the dropships, dancing on one foot to the other, firing the crystalline shards at their new foe. Cerberus troops shuddered as they were impaled by needler rounds, seconds from being turned into pulp inside their own armour.

Next to come out of the heavier dropships, were the infamous Hunters. The massive beasts were literally turned into walking tanks. Full body armour, energy shields and hybrid rotary arm canons, made them something to be feared.

A platoon of Atlas Mechs and Mako tanks converged on a band of Hunters. Jane watched with great fascination as the hulking aliens raised their shields to absorb the firepower.

"Shit, those guys are badass," Vega muttered.

A couple of UNSC Airborne had been dropped in behind the Hunters, and decided to watch the show. In unison, the two brothers raised their weapons, and fired. The closet Mako didn't have a chance standing up against the murderous onslaught. In a matter of moments, it was reduced to nothing but slag, by the ghostly green stream.

The Hunters being the faster ones, charged at their mechanised opponents, and quickly overwhelmed anyone stupid enough to engage them on foot. Cerberus guardians were crushed underneath the boot of the Hunters, or simply swatted aside. Their shields were paled in comparison to the gestalt behemoths.

Switching to "flamethrower" mode, the Hunters shrouded the Cerberus forces in a firestorm of green plasma. Jane managed to catch a few outlines of centurions before they were turned into nothing.

Atlas Mechs didn't do any better against the faster pair of Hunters. The massive beings smashed their shields against the canopy, shattering it with ease and crushing the pilots.

"Chief, do you copy?" it was Cortana, who was stationed on _Majestic_.

"Copy, Cortana," John replied.

"Prowlers have wiped out the Cerberus fleet; we're going to be dropping in some light armour for you. Air Force and Army have decided to lend us a hand on this one."

"Roger that."

Shepard's visor hadn't polarised yet, allowing the team to still see her face. "If C-Sec is getting overrun, that means Cerberus has taken

their HQ. So that's where we go."

John gave a slight nod, before flicking on his COMs and allocating units to complete certain objectives. Marines were going to act as the bulkhead, sweeping through Cerberus forces. ODSs were to jump behind enemy lines and make things easier for the Jarheads, while Airborne were going in as search and rescue.

"Commander One-one-seven," said a voice, sounding similar to Shepard's, "Commander Palmer here, we've been assigned to your Command, what are your orders?"

"Is that contempt I hear in her voice?" Keyes asked over the public channel.

Jane looked at Essingdon in shock. _Did he just say that over a public channel?_

"Ah Keyes, good to see you still kicking," Palmer chuckled.

"Always a pleasure, get your people to follow us in."

"Copy that."

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"_Corbulo was wiped out, what makes you think a breeding ground for spooks would do any better? That's why we're going in to pull those boys out."_

-Commander Sarah Palmer, briefing Majestic Squad on the evacuation of Exemplar Grammar Academy during the Coalition-Covenant War

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:****

****Quick sidenote, I have no idea who's going to live or die in Halo 4â€¦ so just assume in this story, that somehow the characters are resurrected OR they have an offspring named after themâ€¦****

****If you're asking about a Chief/Cortana pairing, I'm afraid I must say no. That kind of pairing doesn't work for me. I don't care how hot Cortana is, the fact that she's the younger, digitalised version of Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey, who is a ****mother figure**** to the Chiefâ€¦ well, you can guess the rest.****

****And what makes you guys and gals think that I'm going to have a pairing?****

****Anyway, please review. I hope to get another chapter out soon.****

29. The Coup: Part 2

****A/N:****

****Halo 4â€¦ excellent, new material to assimilate. License to add a**

Forerunner character, sometime in the near future. We can all assume that the events surrounding the Reclaimer Trilogy did happen, but I'm excising a lot of artistic license here.**

Also, getting conflicting information about John's eye colour. Some say its blue, other's say its brownâ€¦ I've got a compromise! Glowing blue eyes that were once brown as a result of enhancements and Positronic brain lattice implants. Quick reminder, the Chief (or any other Spartan-II) may have looked oldâ€¦ but not anymore.

Note; Airborne is based off of the 75**th**** Ranger Regiment, 101****st**** Airborne and Delta Force.
>ONISAD is based off Mossad and CIASAD. Notice how they end in 'sad'.

If some of you haven't noticed, Blue Team is KIAâ€¦ just thought I'd let you know.

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"_They went through hell and back, just to find meâ€¦ the rest of me. They look so youngâ€¦ he looks so young. Last time I saw him, he looked old, but nowâ€¦ so young, just like the day I first met him. Essingdon, he's done so much for me, for us. He made me better, so that I can keep on looking out for John."_

_Cortana, referring to Commander John [Neil Richards] 117, Second Element (I), Majestic Squad (Spartan-IV), and Chalk-1 (1__st__ Airborne Division).__

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_**Office of Naval Intelligence
>Section III
Beta-1 Division
>Classified; Eyes only
Subject: MJOLNIR GEN5 (For S2s only)

>From: Doctor Amanda Thorkais
To: LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes
>CC: Doctor Delilah Orton_

Hey Essingdon

_Your mother, Delilah and I have done some number crunching and forwarded you the new schematics for the GEN5 armour. The chaps at RnD are really pleased with this one. It's made only for the Spartan-IIIs as they are the __only__ ones who can use it._

_Newly added hardware:
>_Micro-plasma coils:__ these are located on the arms, excellent for melee.
>_Positronic Brain Lattice v2.3:__ Tweaked for Contender Class AIs. Faster interface and sync time with drones.
>_Gravity Manipulators:__ Our Star Wars fanatics have dubbed these "tractor beams". Excellent for grabbing things at range, and displacing enemy units. NOTE: These only work if opposition does not have Biotic Barriers, Grav-Distortion fields, and similar counter-measures.
>_Thruster Pack:__ Allows the user to fly for short periods of time, it's more or less a jump-jetpack.
>_Microwave Energy Transmitter:__ Perfect for energy

weapons/cells. The fire rate of the Sabre, SAW, MA9series, etc, outpaces the MET's transference rate. So, we've set the on board computers to recharge spent cells. Tell your S2 pals to keep their empty mags.

>_HUD-GroundNet Systems:__ These will fill in the role passive roles of AIs that would normally tag along. The system will sort through messages, instantly patch through transmissions, and actively scan the surrounding environment for anything of interests.

>_Superluminal (Slipstream Space) Transmitters:__ Long range communications, very difficult to jam. ONISAD were the first to get their hands on these. Don't tell Palmer, she might get jealous.

>_Slipstream Space Teleporter:__ So this isn't something that hasn't been incorporated into our combat doctrine, I doubt that it ever will. But it could come in handy sometime. GEN5 is the first to have this incorporated. Once again, don't tell Palmerâ€| she might get jealous.

>_Mimicry Skin__: Something ONISAD got first. Mimicry is incredibly useful on the battlefield. Merge in with your surroundings. This isn't as effective as the Stealth Modules, but it is more efficient. (You can tell Palmer about this one, her people got it a long time ago).__

Maria tested the GEN5, and she was quite pleased with it. She said it was like the first time putting on the MJOLNIR. Imagine that? She felt a bit overwhelmed by the system, that's saying something!

_Anyway, I've sent the schematics to the brains' trust on _Majestic_; they should have a GEN5 suit ready for the Commander-117 in a few hours. I'll forward them to fleets with S2s tagging along._

_Take care Essingdon, I still don't understand why you go out into the field. _

Kind regards

Your loving cousin, Amanda

P.S: You talked to Anthony lately? Delilah says she hasn't managed to contact him for a while. Also, quick sidenote, Alpha-1 Division has managed a break through with dealing the Flood. It's basically caustic gas that reacts violently to the Flood. You'll get the reports sometime in the future.

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_**Office of Naval Intelligence

>Special Activities Division
Classified; Eyes only

>From: Alice "Corona" Samson
To: Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky

>CC: Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, UNSC

HIGCOM_

Commander Sarah Palmer

_Possible candidate for ONISAD Field Work, her loyalty, tactical ability and physical prowess is unquestionably high. However to ease her into the work required by ONISAD, it would be advisable to assign

Palmer to a seasoned team before she can command one of her own._

I recommend, Fifth Element.

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****CITADEL, PRESIDIUM, C-SEC HQ****

As the Coalition dropships touched down on the stricken C-Sec HQ, the remaining defenders didn't know whether to hope or despair. Massive aliens, towering over Krogans rushed forward with such grace and speed that was thought not possible.

The Elites are always first on the ground; it is in their nature, their bravado to do so. But these groups of Elites weren't of the ordinary stock. They're the Special Operations soldiers, the vanguard of the Sangheili race. And the Elite leading them, was the famed Arbiter Thel 'Vadam.

Swift lunges with the blade and accurate shooting with the plasma rifle saw a quick end to any Cerberus fighters. Some of the C-Sec officers stood where they were, and watched in awe as the majestic race of aliens tended to the wounded.

"Looks like they do have a heart," Thompson said, walking across the catwalk.

"What?" Vega asked.

"Elites prefer not to heal wounds. It's in their culture."

"Used to be," Vadam spoke up. "Our numbers have dwindled, we cannot afford petty superstitions."

Additional Ospreys came in and dropped off chalks of Blood Talons, their grey-white livery armour was more streamlined than the ODST's, albeit slightly larger. The Airborne soldiers quick moved in and secured the area, preparing to spread out and weaken Cerberus presence.

"Just in the nick of time, Shepard," Bailey thanked, "Cerberus hit us pretty hard here, but once I get the COMs online, I think my people will get a fighting chance. I'll warn them not to hit your fellas too."

"Appreciate it," Shepard said.

"Cerberus, such a pitiful faction," Javik cursed

A team of Talons moved up to the main entrance and unlocked the door. The moment the dual steel gates parted upon, a Talon threw a flashbang grenade into the foyer, before proceeding.

"Clear!" he called out.

Bailey beckoned Shepard to follow him to the main desk, there he sat down at the console and began bypassing Cerberus security.

"This'll make things faster," Keyes said, placing a hand on the console.

An array of information flashed in front of the scientist's eyes as he combed his way through C-Sec mainframe. It was complex, but not difficult to overcome, eventually, all of Cerberus's bugs were removed, and communications were restored.

"Impressive," Bailey complimented, "I'll stay here and coordinate my people."

The console winked, causing Bailey to frown.

"What is it?" Shepard asked.

"It's a warning from Councillor Valern. He's supposed to be here meeting with the executor." He then read out the message, "be on guard, the likelihood of betrayal from within is high. Not a lot else, but if he's inside."

"Why would he go there?" the Spectre asked.

"Normally if someone big is about to be prosecuted. I guess that someone had Cerberus friends," Bailey answered.

"The Councillor mentioned Udina," Garrus said, "but that's insane. Does he even have this kind of pull?"

"Valern would have the answer to that," Bailey said.

"One Councillor is better than, where are we heading?"

"Could still be in the executor's office," Garrus suggested.

"Alright, let's get there."

From afar, John listened in on the conversation. Using his armours newly installed equipment, he allowed Cortana and anyone else with authorisation to see and hear everything around him.

"You know, these systems aren't that different from what I've thought," the Smart AI commented, "it's actually quite easy accessing all the information here."

"You're hacking into their systems?" John asked over the encrypted COM channel.

"Not just me, Preston is also giving me a hand," Cortana said, trying to make her sound less of the culprit

"Don't get too carried away."

"How can I?" the AI joked, "I've got to keep an eye out for you."

"Appreciated."

John turned his gaze towards Shepard

"Chief," she called out, "grab a couple of guys and come with me."

The Spartan-II nodded in acknowledgement, signalling to a unit of Talons, designated as Chalk-7, to come with him.

"Lieutenant Sanders, sir," said a young male voice, "ready to go on your command."

"Copy," John then flicked to his COM, "Keyes, stay here and coordinate reinforcements. Palmer, go and find the rest of the Council, Keyes will point you there."

"Acknowledged," Palmer said. She waved to Majestic and Crimson Squad to follow her

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****CITADEL, PRESIDIUM****

The attack was almost for naught by now, Coalition and C-Sec forces had wiped out most of Group 1 and 2, leaving Group 3 left to finish the task. It was clear to Oxide that escape would be very slim by now. The Cerberus Battlegroup had been annihilated with brutal efficiency by recon elements. That alone said a lot about the naval power of the Coalition.

Carbon ordered the remaining Cerberus forces to rally to his position; they were going to kill the Asari Councillor, one way, or another. Oxide just hoped that Leng had finished off the Salaraiian Councillor. With Udina taking control of emergency powers for a week or two, Cerberus could discreetly expand, and fulfil their goals. Of course, there would be line of successions from other species, but Oxide knew for a fact, that there were Cerberus assassins and saboteurs lying in wait.

Concentrated fire scored a string of hits on Cerberus fireteams, forcing the combatants to find refuge in the meagre cover they had. Oxide leaned out from the doorway and fired a couple of bursts at an Alliance soldier. The heavy calibre bullets drilled through her head and kept on going, dropping her in an instant.

"Move up!" Carbon ordered, "Three-four and Three-five, stay here and cover our ass."

"Affirmative," a centurion responded. "Get those turrets deployed."

"Let's make this quick, enemy reinforcements are closing in!"

The remainder of the assaulting force pressed on, sweeping aside any C-Sec officers that tried to delay them. Carbon ordered the phantoms to move through the maintenance catwalks to weaken opposing fortifications. Guardians, engineers, a handful of nemesis and an Atlas walker, formed a rear guard to cover the hunter team.

"I've got eyes on the Councillors!" Oxide yelled.

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****CITADEL, PRESIDIUM****

Ash swore inwardly again as she ran into heavier resistance. Cerberus was really hell-bent on taking the Council. What made things worse, was that one of Major Licil's squad, had been wiped out.

Who the hell wipes out a seven Asari Commandos that fast?

Gathal, a seasoned Turian, was holding his ground with a Phaeston and a Black Widow sniper rifle. Already, he had scored a string of kills against Cerberus. Most of his kills were nemesis and phantoms, clearly displaying his marksmanship.

"Atlas!" Gathal roared, moments before a rocket blew his body apart.

"Incoming enemy reinforcements to our six!"

I don't have my fucking armour! Ash cursed. She was wearing her smart-casual garb, which is meant for day to day activities, not get caught in a full blown fire fight.

Heavy rounds crashed around Ash, and she had a gut feeling that not many people were going to make it out alive today.

"Lieutenant Commander Ashley Williams, come in," her COM sparked, it was a woman's voice. Similar to Shepard's but lacking that low tone ever present in the Spectre. This voice, sounded younger, youthful, but wise.

Looks like Thane pulled through.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Williams," Ash replied, "who's this over?"

"Commander Sarah Palmer, of the UNSC," came the reply.

So they're still around.

"We can use help right now, Cerberus forces are tearing us a new one here!" Ash said urgently.

"Copy, we're on our way. We're coming in from the Embassies. Don't shoot at the Elitesâ€¦|" there was a pause, "don't shoot at any aliens you don't recognise."

"Copy that."

The COMs switched off, but the message was clear. Ash couldn't help but feel a certain level of joy as she realised she wasn't alone in the fight.

"Williams, I need moreâ€¦|" Tevos never finished what she had to say. A barrage of accurate fire tore the Asari Councillor, and the Commandos guarding her, into bloodied shreds.

Williams froze, but only for a second. "Councillor down!"

She turned to look at where the fire came from; her blood ran cold when she saw the three tall ominous figures. She caught their outline when their Kodiak went down; it wasn't hard to guess that they had

been the ones that wiped out the squad of Commandos.

The three figures were clad in fearsome looking armour, sporting a grey and gold livery. Their visors were of a dull grey, and sported optics. Ash guessed that these were Cerberus's best.

Williams tried to raise her gun, but her arms wouldn't respond. A dull-sharp sensation spread through her body as she careened towards the ground.

My shields are gone! Her mind screamed.

Blood oozed out of her wounds and onto the reflective floor, she tried to stop the bleeding but her hands wouldn't work. She looked back up at the three figures, and down the barrel of a gun.

Forgive me.

Williams's death was quick and painless; the bullet had smashed through her skull, putting her to eternal sleep.

â€|

Palmer and her team of Spartan-IVs was not far away from their objective when they saw the Asari Councillor and Ashley Williams go down. Sarah had already done her homework on the species of the Council when Keyes had returned. UNSC Analysts exploded in a fury of motions, working overtime to correctly process information to update everyone.

The Commander knew that Asari weren't built for direct confrontation. Being pinned down made them sitting ducks.

"Crimson, flank around and secure the far side. Majestic, snipe them all," Palmer ordered.

Green acknowledgement lights winked on. Crimson Squad moved along the balcony and back onto the maintenance ways to cut off Cerberus retreat.

The Spartan-IVs used their armour's gravity manipulators to move additional cover to protect the remaining Councillor and displace Cerberus troops.

Sarah levelled her Ember rifle and expertly picked off the opposing forces. She zeroed in on the team that executed Williams, and squeezed the trigger. But the target had already movedâ€| a clean miss.

She tried using her gravity manipulators (or traction beams), but they had no effect.

Counter-measures, Palmer thought. "Crimson, see the big three?"

"We see them," said a female voice.

"Focus on knocking them out!"

"Copy."

Majestic Squad took up firing positions along the balcony overlooking the fire fight. Missiles from Grant and Madeen's Achilles pack, penetrated the Atlas's canopy, and exploded. The ensuing fireball that followed killed a squad of Cerberus soldiers, while injuring a few more with shrapnel.

"Good hit," Thorne complimented.

Palmer jumped onto the bluish metal floor below and went to check on the last Councillor, a human, named Donnel Udina.

"Councillor?" Palmer asked her helmets split at the seams and retracted into the rest of the suit, revealing her strikingly elegant face.

"Y-yes?" he stammered as he lowered his weapon.

"We're here to get you out."

****XXxxXX****

****CITADEL, PRESIDIUM****

â€|

**Incoming CommuniquÃ©**

You are authorised to fire upon Coaction forces

â€|

Oxide looked at the order; he didn't feel too comfortable about carrying them through. The same could be said for the rest of his team.

"I'm not liking this at all," Oxide said.

"Minimise then," Carbon said, "we'll fall back to _Nightwalker_."

"Copy."

Slowly, the team edged away from the fight, and sprinted to their escape. Using their gravity manipulators, they were able to move along the metal floor without making so much as a sound. The team moved into a narrow hallway, just a few hundred meters away from the extraction point.

"I've got something on the sensors," Ozone said, "it's faint, but it'sâ€|"

An armoured fist burst from the walls and collided into Ozone's optics, shattering the apparatus. Five heavily armoured soldiers crashed through, weapons high. The words _Crimson Squad_, engraved onto their chest plate.

"Fuck!" Oxide swore.

The trio of Operatives knew that their weapons could not break

through the enemies shields, (provided that what the Illusive Man said was true).

"I'm not comfortable doing this," Carbon muttered.

"Join the club," Oxide said.

Without a moment's hesitation Crimson Squad opened fired. Oxide, Carbon and Ozone leapt and pushed off the reflective bluish walls, before lunging at Crimson. Their drawn monomolecular blades, encased in cobalt plasma, crackled and hissed as they were swung with precision.

Crimson members ducked and dodged expertly as they unsheathed their melee weapons.

The sound of plasma colliding filled the air as the two parties battled. The narrow hallway forced Crimson to have two of their members hang back, while the other three battled. However, still, they managed to use their numbers to their advantage. The moment one of their own would falter even the slightest, they would rotate through.

Oxide knew he would need to act fast. He couldn't keep it up much longer. His muscles were on the verge of screaming in defiance. Any bystander looking from afar, would only see blurs and one helluva light display. They were moving that fast.

Seeing an opening that Carbon had created against his opponent, Oxide quickly feinted left, and rammed his blade under the Crimson Operative's chest plate. The woman's body came to a violent halt as the plasma blade burned through her as if she was butter.

The immediate change in combat tempo caught Crimson off guard. Never before had one of their own had been killed. To have a casualty inflicted upon by what was supposedly an inferior force, was just unthinkable. But it had happened.

Oxide twisted the blade and jerked it violently upward, before pulling it out in a swift motion. He let the body crumbled into a heap onto the floor.

Forgive me, Oxide prayed.

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****CITADEL, PRESIDIUM, ENROUTE TO EXECUTOR'S OFFICE****

"Thane, where are you?" Shepard asked over the COM.

"I'm on my way to the executor's office," the Drell replied, "I'm running out of breath though."

"We'll be there soon," Jane reassured.

Shepard had ordered her ground team to stay behind and help root out Cerberus forces. Vega didn't mind as he got to see the UNSC in action, the same could be said for Javik. Garrus on the other hand, wanted to compete against a couple of Blood Talon and Helljumper snipers to see who the better marksman was.

So far, Jane was quite pleased with the progress her group was making. Fifty-seven, a large number to be smashing through the urban confines of the Citadel, nonetheless, they were burning through any Cerberus stragglers.

Upon reaching the grey metal doors of the executor's office, four Talons took up breaching positions, while a fifth, most likely an engineer, hacked through security. The doors parted upon with a small hiss, and the soldiers surged through.

Shepard surveyed the shot up office. Two Salarian STG Operatives lay dead, killed by stab wounds. The executor was slumped over his desk, with a bullet to the head.

"Bailey, I've got two dead salarians and the executor's been killed," Shepard said over the COM.

"Damn," Ammando muttered, "well if you don't see the Councillor, don't count him out yet."

"I've got movement!" Lieutenant Sanders called. He gestured to the conference room down below, where an additional three dead STG Operatives lay. Valern stood in a corner, protected two salarians. One Jane recognised as Kirrahe and the other was most likely a Spectre. In the centre of the room however, were three figures in a savage melee battle.

Both of them she recognised, one was Thane, and the other, Kasumi Goto. The one that they were fighting looked like a cyborg Cerberus "ninja". He and Thane, were wielding shortswords, and were clothed in similar attire.

Without a word, Shepard created a biotic shockwave, shattering the thick plane of glass. She was the first one to jump down, landing on the glass with a crunch. The Chief soon followed behind her, while the Talons fanned out.

Jane watched as Thane landed as satisfying roundhouse kick to the Cerberus Operative's jaw, stunning him completely. The Drell then hurled his opponent across the table, where Kasumi awaited to deliver the final strike. With a swift motion, the woman of Japanese descent rammed her blade into her Asian opponent. The Operative jerked violently, before coming to stillness as his blood flowed over the black marble.

"He was a difficult one," Thane said, before bowing his head to utter a prayer.

Shepard waited until Thane finished.

"It's good to see you again, Chief," the Drell smiled. He sounded like a being at peace and free.

"Likewise," John replied.

"Hey big guy," Kasumi said cheerily. Shepard could swear she heard some of the Talons snicker. "Where's Shepard?"

"Here," Jane answered as her helmet parted and folded away.

"Woah," Kasumi said. Before Jane had undergone S-IV enhancements, she was about Kasumi's height, and now, she towered over her friend. "What have you been eating? And where can I get some?"

"Good to see you too Kasumi," Jane smiled, "what are you doing here?"

"You know me," Kasumi began with a grin, "I like to make sure my competition remains healthy." She gestured towards the Salarian in yellow-black livery armour. "He's been tracking me; normally people who follow me have a habit of getting into trouble. Jonduum Bau's a nice guy, so I wanted him to be safe."

"Very kind of you Ms Goto," Jonduum bowed. ****(A/N: Pun intended!)****

"Well, the Citadel got attacked, I saw Thane and Bau heading in the same direction, and decided to tag along."

"If it weren't for you, the outcome would've been severely different," Thane, thanked.

"Thank you," Valern said, "all of you. Ms Goto, I'm sure Bau would be happy to wave aside any charges."

Jondaum nodded, "it's been fun, do keep in touch."

"But I'm afraid I must get onto more pressing matters," Valern continued, "Udina, he plans to kill us all."

"He's almost succeeded," John said in his low voice.

"What?" Shepard asked.

"Palmer called in," the Chief said, "Tevos, Sparatus and Lieutenant Commander Ashley Williams has been killed."

****XXxxXX****

****CITDAEL, PRESIDIUM****

With most of Cerberus annihilated, Sarah led Majestic Squad after Crimson. She didn't expect Cerberus forces to get very far, but after a while of jogging, she decided to pick up the pace.

"Commander," Demarco said, "Optics picking something up, twenty meters around the bend."

Palmer decided to take point, and pushed through the haze of smoke caused by the fires. She leaned around the corner just in time to see the last two of Crimson be killed.

The three Cerberus Operatives moved with such speed and strength that the executing moves was nothing short of spectacular. One Operative grabbed onto Crimson-One arm, and rammed his plasma blade into the Spartan-IV's jugular, before slamming his head into the wall. The audible crack could be heard as there was a sizeable dent left behind.

I've seen this before! I can't remember where though.

Palmer quickly ordered her people around the bend. "Open fire!"

The air suddenly filled with seething energy bolts. But the Cerberus Operatives quickly grabbed the fallen bodies of the Spartan-IV's and used them as meatshields. Retrieving the discarded weapons, the counter-fire was unnervingly accurate. Each shot was aimed at the head, forcing Majestic back into cover. Sparks of molten metal rained down into the hallway, moments before the lights cut out.

"Do not switch to night vision," Sarah hissed.

Seconds later, flashbang grenades rolled down the hallway. The first one went off instantly, immediately disorientating the group of Spartan-IVs. But just as they recovered, another one went off. Palmer swore inwardly.

How does a Cerberus squad outclass Spartan-IVs? Palmer pondered.
It's just not possible.

The moment her vision cleared, Sarah peaked around the corner again, but they were gone.

"Check for vitals," Palmer ordered.

Majestic squad quickly secured the area, while Hoya scanned each Crimson Squad member.

"We've got one alive," Hoya said, "barely though."

Palmer was thankful that there was one still alive, but the way the Spartan-IV had been positioned, would've made her an easy kill. Sarah wondered why the Cerberus Operatives spared her. It's not like they wanted to leave a message or anything.

Why would they spare her? Palmer wondered, _no way it was because she's a woman. Emma and Alice were killed quickly. And chivalry has died down over the yearsâ€¦ Something to think about later_.

"Keyes," Sarah said over the COMs, "we've got an S-Four Team down."

"Damn," Keyes muttered, "how many?"

"Four dead, one critically wounded, but stable."

"Can they be revived?"

"Negative, too much trauma to the brain."

"Shit," Keyes said, "get me their armour feeds. This is something for Fifth Element to deal with when we see them."

"This is ONISAD's jurisdiction?" Sarah asked, slightly annoyed.

"When a team of S-Fours gets taken down that quickly, it becomes ONISAD's business."

"Copy that, out."

The COM switched off, allowing Palmer to kneel down and further inspect the damages. Sam's brain had been skewered by a plasma blade, Cam's head had been turned to pulp, with blood oozing out of his cracked visor.

How the fuck does this happen? Palmer wondered. She could feel her blood boil, but her heart ache as her people are no longer as invincible as they would like to be. Crimson had always been the more jovial Squad in the Spartan-IV branch. Their apparent demise would be a sore blow to the rest.

"Palmer," Keyes called over the COM.

"Yeah?"

"Hood forwarded me an email, marked urgent. You might want to have a look at it."

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"_No matter how advanced technology is, creating a perfect clone is very well near impossible. You can only get so close, but you will never create a perfect clone. It's like an asymptote on a graph, you can get so close, but you'll never get there. When the Forerunners reseeded the galaxy, they used cloning and gestation of embryos. These clones were near perfect, but there's a catch. They can suffer from cancer, and they age. Aging is caused by telomere degeneration, something that our _natural_ ancestors never experienced. Before the fall of Prehistoric Humanity, the lifespan of homo-sapiens was indefinite, their immune system was far stronger than ours."

—

-Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey, talking to LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: THA PLOT THICKANS! (Purposely misspelt that.)****

****Last quotation is a direct poke at how Traviss said that Halsey had the technology to create perfect clonesâ€| Karen, y u destroy Nylund's works? (Apparently, she didn't credit anything to Nylund as well â€" nor did she consult him).**
>Also, I want to emphasize that Spartan-IVs will never be as good as Spartan-IIs. IIs are greater than IIIs, IIIs are greater than IVs.

****Not too sure if I want to do a Palmer/Chief pairingâ€| I've got something else in mind for her.****

****And as I mentioned earlier, I can't bring myself to do a Cortana/Chief pairing. Cortana is a younger version of Dr Halsey, who's a mother figure to all the Spartan-IIs. Asking me to write a pairing like that, is****

****So, who actually wants a pairing in this story? Post a review and let me know (it'll make things easier for me to tally up the scores,**

rather than having to trawl through my PMs).**

30. Road to Home

A/N: Hmmm, so many people are hoping for a Chief/Shepard pairing. I was more or less leaning in that direction too. No matter, to those who don't want a pairing. I won't devote an entire chapter (or more) to pure romance (etc)â€¦ I'm not a Harry Potter Harmony writer (oh wait).

The pairing will be more of an undertone element; it will be barely noticeable (more or less). After all, this story is devoted to badassery and slaughter.

And no one caught the hint I put in last chapter?

**Note: I chose Crimson as a squad name randomly.
>Also, when I'm referring to body suits (worn by the Spartans), they look similar to the ones seen in Spartan Ops, worn by the S4s.

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"_Hi there,"
>**-Paul Demarco**_

"_Well hello, Spartanâ€¦?"
>**-Commander Sarah Palmer**_

"_Paul Demarco, I lead Fireteam Majestic."
>**-Paul Demarco**_

"_Wowâ€¦ a whole fireteam huh?"
>**-Commander Sarah Palmer**_

"_I'm sorry; I didn't catch your name."
>**-Paul Demarco**_

"_Sarah Palmerâ€¦ Commander Sarah Palmer. I lead all the fireteams aboard Infinity."
>**-Commander Sarah Palmer**_

"_Ohâ€¦ burn."
>**-Lotus â€œ Bright Qin Zhou**_

"_And who might you jackasses be?"
>**-Commander Sarah Palmer, to Fifth Element**_

"_The Innies' worst fucking nightmare."
>**-Greystone â€œ Brian Northore Zhuge**_

**[UNSC Infinity]**

XXxxXX

SERPENT NEBULA, NEAR THE CITADEL, SSV **_NORMANDY SR-**_**2,
DOCKED ON UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_

Jane sat in the Officer's lounge of her ship as she stared out of the

viewport. She was still wearing her black bodysuit, but had her armour plates taken off, save for the knee and shin pads. Ashley Williams is dead, and nothing could be done to bring her back. Half her brain had spilt onto the metal tiles, making resurrection impossible.

"I'm sorry Ash," Shepard whispered.

She clutched her old friend's dog tags, wishing that she could've gotten to the Citadel sooner. The Spectre had made doubly sure that Udina would be handed over for tribunal, she wanted to shoot the slimy bastard so bad, but she wanted him to live long enough to see his reputation crash and burn.

Jane remembered what Keyes said earlier. The moment they reached Earth, Majestic Squad would rotate for Fifth Element. The ONISAD team will then join the Normandy in the fight against Cerberus. The Coalition counter-attack suffered little casualties. The dead were Fireteam Crimson, killed by three Cerberus Operatives.

"Jane?" the Chief called as he stepped into the lounge. A dull thud could be heard every time his heel touched the deck. He was still wearing his armour.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about Williams," his tone barely changed from neutral, but it sounded sincere. That meant a lot to the Spectre.

"They killed her, didn't they?" Jane referred to the towering Cerberus Operatives.

"Yes."

Shepard sighed. "How's Vega doing?"

"He's toughing it out," John answered. "Keyes and T'Soni are already waiting for us on Majestic."

"Back to work huh?"

John nodded; he placed a reassuring hand on Shepard's shoulder and said, "We'll get through this."

As Jane walked onto the main deck of Majestic, she felt awed by the massive ship. The interior of the vessel had been intricately designed to improve subconscious mentality and give the crew every advantage against boarding parties, while retaining a militarist utilitarian feel. It was essentially a reflective silvery grey themed setting with white lights.

Off duty Spartan-IVs moved around the deck, wearing their black bodysuits, black cargo pants and boots. Other Spartans who had just returned, were heading to the armoury for gear maintenance. Huragoks floated by to make a quick check on equipment before waving them through.

"Chief, good to see you again." It was Admiral Thomas Lasky. Shepard made a mental note of the senior officer's attire, a sharp greyish black uniform, with ultra-light armour pads and insignia.

"Likewise sir," John answered.

Out of common courtesy, he eased off his helmet and tucked it under his arm. Something Jane noted that he hadn't done before. Many UNSC personnel stopped to take a look at the face of the man who saved humanity. The vast majority of them were surprised to see a young face underneath the visor, serious blue eyes with a hint of brown, auburn hair fading to a chestnut hazel, and healthy looking skin. Many had associated an old face with his borderline unnaturally deep voice.

Palmer was even more surprised to see the Chief's new face. The first time she saw him without a helmet, she saw old weary eyes and weathered pale skin. He still had the weary eyes, but at least he looked more relaxed and human.

"Still not use being called 'sir' by you, Chief," Lasky chuckled.

"I call you sir, and you seem fine with that," Palmer said.

"You weren't the one saving my ass when I was a cadet," Lasky said. "Anyway, better get to level four, gym five. Granite Team and Third Element is there, I don't want any broken bones this time okay?"

"Okay, I'll see you guys later," Palmer said before leaving.

Lasky turned to Shepard, and couldn't help but notice the similarities between Sarah and Jane. "Admiral Thomas Lasky of the UNSC Majestic, welcome aboard."

"Commander Jane Shepard," the Spectre said warmly, "glad to be here."

"Well, the boffins up stairs have received schematics for your new armour Chief."

"Yes sir," John said, sounding as if he was just discussing the weather.

"Maria said it was like putting on the suit the first time," Thomas added.

John raised his eyebrow. "I'll get there soon sir."

"Take a V-Twenty-four."

"Yes sir."

"And Chief, call me Lasky."

"Copy."

As the two Spartans walked towards an awaiting transport, they could feel the excitement in the air as humanity was about to return home. Platoons of soldiers walked across the balconies towards the armouries. As the wind rushed passed, Jane's hair fluttered, forcing her to tie it into a pony tail.

The Sparrow touched down at a landing pad outside of the Armoury/Tech Lab, allowing the two to disembark. Two ODSs who stood guard, snapped a crisp salute as the doors parted.

John entered and saw a set of armour supported by extended robotic arms. The powered suit resembled a cross between Didact's and the MJOLNIR GEN4. It was sleek, and the plates were positioned in such a way that they would slide over one another whenever they moved. The armour was painted with a deep greyish green and black scheme, with a reflective gold visor, the apparent trademark of the Spartan-IIs.

"GEN-Five," Keyes said, walking across the white room with Liara in tow.

He held a pipe in one hand, while the other was stuffed into his lab coat's pocket. In accordance to usually protocol, Liara wouldn't be allowed in the armoury. But since she was a friend of the Head of Section III (who was also a personal friend of the CO of _Majestic_), protocols and regulations were waved aside.

"Give it a try," Keyes said, "it responds only to you."

The Spartan-II placed his helmet down on the table, and walked into the vacant arc of robotic arms. The mechanical limbs extended from their position and quickly unlatched the armour plates. Grav-beams kicked in to catch the plates and set them gently into lockers.

Now only in his body suit, John walked over to the GEN5. He waved his hand over the chest plate, and was surprised to see seams appear as it split open. The Spartan turned around and walked backwards into the open armour. As his body moved into position, the plates and bodysuit slid back into place, encasing him.

John felt his nervous system assaulted by the new system; an ice colder mercury feeling flooded the back of his head as the armour synced with his implants. Maps, shield meters, messages and subtitles appeared on his blue themed HUD as he looked around the room.

There seemed to be a look of approval on all of the scientist's faces. Everyone was impressed with the GEN5.

"How does it feel?" Keyes asked.

The Spartan flexed his fingers, and was surprised to feel them flick out at surprising speed.

"Take it slow," Keyes said.

â€|

UNSC **_MAJESTIC**_**, LEVEL 4, GYM 5**

Palmer looked at the two teams working out; so far both of them were behaving. Though she was more concerned about Granite Team, her Spartan-IVs were usually the ones who started the fights. Something that was unexpected due to the expected professionalism in each soldier. Nonetheless, Granite was bench-pressing, and Riley James Sanderson had led his team off to some meeting.

Seeing that there was no imminent danger, Sarah decided to retreat back to her billet. A quick monorail ride later, and dealing with some gawking men, Palmer arrived at her room.

She took off her boots and eased herself onto her bed. Remembering that Hood had sent her a message, she pulled out her tacpad, and projected the violet holographic interface in front of her. Tapping the _empty_ air, she opened up her message box and read the message.

_**UNSC SPARTAN-IV

>From: Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood
To: Commander Sarah Palmer

>CC: Anthony Stanforth Zhuge; Admiral Margaret Orelenda
Parangosky_

Dear Commander Sarah Palmer

Recent observations and recommendations have alerted me to your suitability of being transferred into ONISAD. Aptitude and Intelligence Quotient tests have further enforced your candidacy for this Division.

I would like to know if you accept or decline this invitation as soon as possible.

Should you accept, you will be assigned to Fifth Element. One of the more experienced teams in handling counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, they will be providing support against Cerberus.

Kind regards

Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood

Sarah knew ONISAD's notorious reputation. But these were the guys who would no doubt be hunting those that killed Crimson, and Palmer wanted answers. With her mind made up, she sent her acceptance, and turned in for bed.

â€|

UNSC **_MAJESTIC**_**, COMMAND BRIDGE**

After making sure that there was a sizeable defence group at the Citadel, and dropping of various diplomats. Lasky ordered the Sol Fleet to make final preparations to move out. The Fleets were to concentrate their strength in Alliance Space, pushing back Reaper control.

Once Sol Fleet reclaimed Earth, an auxiliary fleet would move in and guard the homeworld, while Sol Fleet would move onto other objectives.

Gazing at the galactic map, Lasky watched as the armada fanned out.

"_You are weak_,\" the Admiral remembered the Forerunner say, \"_You hide in the clouds while the galaxy is purged. You ran from your duty. Now you have no choice, but to uphold it.\"_

"_Kind of hard to be top dog when you left your technology to be misinterpreted," _Hood rebutted.

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, LONDON, BRITAIN****

Fifth Element was in for the fight of their lives. The endless tied of Reaper hordes were swarming in on their position. Greystone had been forced to discard his Epirus Sniper Rifle as he had depleted all of its ammunition. Lotus had resorted to his tomahawk, while Arca remained with his sidearm.

The darkened sky coupled with heavy rain was making progress through the sewers hell, but at least it slowed down the frail husks.

Arca climbed onto the walkways and combed down the tunnel. A red husk launched itself from a pipe and clawed at the Operative. Arca grunted in pain as the abomination burned through his armour and ripped off his plates. Grabbing the red thing by the throat, and slammed it onto the guard rail.

The abomination exploded in a shower of molten gore which melted anything it touched. Arca was force to tear off his vambraces and helmet as the thermite like substance burned through the composite alloy.

"Fuck!" Lotus swore.

Greystone and Lotus had suffered a similar fate as they ran into the abominations. Reaper forces had whittled them down considerably, rendering their armour near useless against the abominations' combustion.

Reaching into their packs, the team retrieved spare COMs, Optics and AR lenses, and placed them over their bare heads

"We need to shave," Lotus said, referring to the beards that they have grown. Their hair however, still remained neatly groomed.

"More coming in from behind us," Greystone indicated.

"I'll deal with it," Arca said, shouldering the missile launcher.

Peering down the controls, he set the fuse timer, and squeezed the trigger. A plume of smoke left the barrel and streaked into the darkness. The missiles thrusters provided no light, making it virtually invisible to the naked eye in the dark. A low thump filled the air as the explosive particles were dispersed, a split second later; a fiery storm appeared. The initial shockwave tore through the enemy ranks, before the firestorm swept through and burned everything in its path.

"That was my last one," Arca said, slinging the launcher onto his back. He planned to be using it as a club if the going got desperate enough.

"Let's get out of here," Lotus said, wading through the water.

The team climbed up the ladder at the end of the tunnel, with Lotus in the lead. He eased the manhole open and checked the surroundings. Only destroyed buildings, overturned vehicles and rubble greeted them.

"We're clear," Lotus said.

Moving out onto the streets, Arca quickly lead his team into the remnants of a shopping mall walkway.

"So where too?" Greystone asked.

Arca flicked on his COM, "Fhajang? Fhajang come in!"

"Fhajang here, sitrep."

"I think we're somewhere in Westminster," Arca replied, "Big Ben is not too far away."

"Damn," Fhajang swore, "we're fifteen clicks away from Westminster."

"Shit, cut off" again."

"Hold steady guys, one of our Ospreys got a transmission from Sol Fleet, they're coming."

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"_Is it just me? Or does The Didact look like Voldemort on steroids?"

>_**-Lotus " Bight Qin Zhou**_

"_Thank you for ruining Forerunners for me" dick."

>_**-Commander Sarah Palmer**_

"_I agree."

>_**-Greystone " Brian Northorne Zhuge**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: You know, I'll think I'll go read *_**Glasslands**_*"BAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHA! I kid" after seeing the reviews, why would I do that? I'd rather read" TWILIGHT! (Actually, that's debatable.) No offence to the Twilight fans" but I love vampires (from Blade of course), and seeing what has been done in Twilight" well, yeah, you can guess the rest.****

****On a quick sidenote, twilight use to be such a beautiful world" now it's ruined. It was a word that foretold the ending of an era, the end of age, and the descent of sun. (Hey, I can create a pretty convoluted link between the meaning of this world, and to the saga. Here I go. Tis the end of the powerful vampires, the end of a glorious age, and now that twilight has fallen" a new evil rises in the darkness).****

****So what are your views on Palmer joining ONISAD? Please leave a review" I live of it" kinda.****

31. Retake Earth

****A/N:** Quick thanks to Trife for pointing out a fundamental break. It shall be addressed in this chapter. For those of you wonderingâ€¦ I accidentally skipped the part where Coalition Diplomats and Councillors talk.**

****And with regards to the quotes, they're generally inspired by certain events within the game.****

****To Wolf**

>I'm a sucker for a good romance, at heartâ€¦ can't stand the ones in chick flicks though. My idea of a good romance story is something that grows and develops over time.

****Sgt. Nolisten**

>Are you a brony?

****XXxxXX****

"_So, losing power, and crashingâ€¦ is this a regular thing on _Infinity?"

>_**-Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge**_

****XXxxXX****

****CITADEL, EMBASSIES****

Hood walked onto the Embassy level, flanked by UEG diplomats, a Sangheili Ambassador, and a bodyguard detail of ODSs in their black ceremonial dress uniform. The Helljumpers walked in perfect formation, their shoes clicking in unison as they touched the reflective floor. Coalition soldiers who had been placed on temporary security detail stood aside and snapped a crisp salute.

As the detail reached a refurbished conference room, half of the ODSs went inside, while the other half stood guard outside. Major Edward Buck was part of the group standing in front of the doors. C-Sec guards and Council personal shot glances at these newcomers. Buck ordered the platoon of Helljumpers to take up guard positions on the mezzanine and the foyer below.

The Major walked down the stairs just in time to see a number of reporters flood the atrium. He quickly gazed at the overhanging monitor to watch a news report.

"_Just a standard galactic day ago, the Citadel was attacked by Cerberus forces,"_ said an Asari Anchor-woman, "_Cerberus assassin's managed to kill Councillor Tevos, Sparatus and the second human Spectre, Lieutenant Commander Ashley Williams. Were it not for the timely arrival of Commander Jane Shepard and her allies, there is no doubt that the Citadel would fall. Here's Emily Wong, with more on the story."_

A few metres away, a woman of oriental descent began talking to her camera. Buck saw her face appear real-time on the monitor.

"Thank Nasari," the reporter said, "the timely arrival of allied

forces, known as the Coalition, swiftly defeated the Cerberus onslaught, and apprehended Councillor Udina, who is believed to have help instigate the attack. I'm outside the conference room where Coalition leaders are discussing matters with the new Council."

Wnog then turned to interview Buck, who swore inwardly. Press was not his thing. They had a habit of skewering the objective truth.

"Excuse me Major," she began.

Damn.

"Can you please tell us about the Coalition?"

"It's a long story," Buck said.

"Care to shed some light on the topic?" Emily asked.

Edward could swear that he heard the ODSTs snicker behind his back.

Veronica is so going to have to make it up to me this time.

"What would you like to know?" the Major asked, remaining diplomatic.

"Where has the Coalition been all this time?"

"The Magellanic Clouds."

"And why were you there instead of being a part of the galactic community?"

Buck shifted under the rays of the artificial sun. The ceiling glass panes were not tinted enough for this.

"We were running," Buck answered.

Whoever was watching the interview right now, felt their blood run cold. Recent news reports said that the Coalition Armada had easily overpowered the Cerberus Task Force. The sheer size of the massive ships made them a force to be reckoned with against the Reapers. So what could've possibly gotten them on the run?

"Why?" Wong asked, almost afraid to be voicing the question.

"We lost a war, and we were forced to leave."

"Was it the Reapers?"

Other reporters had gathered around to film the interview. This was the biggest scoop in their careers, and there was no way in hell they were going to let it go.

"No," Buck answered.

"Can you please elaborate?" asked an Asari reporter.

"This war isn't something that could be summed up in a few words,"

Edward began, "there will be a public conference next week, where our scholars will explain to you everything."

â€

Sitting down at the round black marble table, Hood placed his cap down in front of him. He was going to let Ambassador Robert Enderfield handle the talking. On one side of the immensely large room, were the Coalition personnel, and on the other side were the Council.

Enderfield wasn't like the politicians that the galaxy was used to seeing. A visionary, an idealist and an advocate of civil rights, Robert is truly a good man at heart. He even had the official qualifications to back him up, a degree in medicine, law and political science.

The black conservative suit and the Exemplar Grammar Academy 1900th Anniversary tie, complimented his slim striking face, jet black hair and brown eyes.

"So what do you propose, Councillor Valern?" Enderfield asked. The Diplomat's views were similar to most of the UNSC Top Brass, they wanted the Council to be involved with the fight, not just sit back and let the Coalition handle it.

"Emergency resources to help us combat the Reapers, our navy cannot defeat the conventionally," the Salarian Councillor replied.

"What resources are we talking about here?" Roberts asked.

"Military hardware," Dalatrass Linron interrupted, like many other leaders of their species; Linron was attending this meeting via communication.

Roberts looked at the holographic representation, but Hood interrupted him.

"You know we can't do that," the Fleet Admiral said, "handing Tier-One level technology to you will be the worst mistake we'll ever make."

"Apologies Admiral Hood," Councillor Irissa said, quickly dissipating the tension. Though the Asari looked and sounded very young. Her wisdom and ability to understand others were well beyond her years. The shock of humanity being a technologically superior race had still not yet worn off.

"I don't blame you for wanting to keep a tight lid on your tech," Matriarch Aethyta said. "If I were in your position, I would've done the same."

The Matriarch had been sent by the asari to act as an additional representative of the race's interests.

Admiral Hackett spoke up, "When we finish the Crucible, we won't have to worry about exchanging resources. The UNSC has a right to their own equipment and how they use it."

"Easy for you to say," the Dalatrass argued, "you've lost your

government, no doubt you'll be merged into the Coalition."

"Dalatrass, I'm more concerned about the Reapers, than someone getting jealous over someone else's toys."

"If we are to fight as a united front against the Reapers, then perhaps we can call upon the Krogan," Primarch Victus said. The Turian was also acting Councillor for his people, and the stress of his job was beginning to show. "The more we have in this fight, the more efficient it will be."

"Okay, so the plan so far is this," Robert started, "Coalition fleets will move against the Reapers, to buy you time to regroup. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?"

"How advanced are you?" Linron asked.

Robert's skin crawled. This was going to be a long day.

"We have a conference next week to explain you some of the details."

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****IN SLIPSPACE, UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**

If there was one thing Jane had learnt about the UNSC ships, is that they had a lot of space. And these spaces were used to store frigates. Majestic carried about 150 Wales-class frigates within its hull. Cruisers would carry 10, carriers would store 20, and Keyships carry none.

Prowlers and Destroyers generally flew as naval escorts, and gave the impression that they would be the mainstay of the Fleets. This would lull the opposition into a false sense of numerical advantage, while cruisers would push through the enemy formation and deploy their small fleet.

Shepard sat in the lounge, wearing her Alliance fatigues over her bodysuit. The recent emails she had received so far were encouraging. Thane said that Coalition Doctors were treating his Kepral Syndrome, and that he'd be back to full strength within a month. Kasumi said that she was off to help Jondum Bau with a few house-cleaning issues. Doctor Chakwas said she survived the Cerberus attack and was more than willing to offer her expertise on the Normandy. However, Jane felt her heart twinge when she read that Kelly Chambers had been killed.

"Commander," it was EDI, "you have an incoming transmission from Admiral Anderson."

"Patch him through."

"Rerouting message to the private lounge."

Shepard stood up and faced the materialising hologram.

"Admiral," she saluted.

"Good to see you Shepard," said the battered senior officer. "Looks like you got yourself kitted out."

"How's it down there?"

"Bad," David frowned, "real bad. The Reapers are bearing down on the UNSC. They've taken heavy casualties. Intel boys got cut off from us again."

"Commander One-one-seven has been given orders to retrieve that team. What's their status?"

"They radioed in with Lieutenant Commander Oh-eight-four," Anderson answered, "they said they had ran into heavy Reaper forces. Almost out of ammo and gears are almost defunct."

"Hang tight, we're almost at Earth."

"After this is over, drinks are on me," Anderson thanked.

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****IN SLIPSPACE UNSC **_**DIVINUS**_**

Within her private quarters, Commander Miranda Keyes gazed at the display console. In only a few short moments, the Sol Fleet will be exiting slipspace and retake Earth. Having been conscious for only a short amount of time, Miranda still felt the old wounds of the Human-Covenant War. It felt surreal to be the one standing behind the big gun instead of in front of it.

"Commander," Cortana said, her physical hard light body easing into the chair. "We're exiting slipspace in a few more hours."

"Tell me something Cortana."

"Sure."

"What happened to you after the war?"

The AI frowned. "I died."

"Rampancy?"

Cortana nodded. "Well part of it was rampancy."

"Are you another copy?" Miranda asked, she had read the reports, but most of it had been censored. She was eager to know.

"No, your brother brought me back. The Positronic Brain is the only system that can handle a smart AI indefinitely."

Miranda swung her bare legs off her bed; she felt a warming sensation as her feet touched the heated "timber" floor.

"John led a team of Tier Ones to rescue me. I had somehow collected myself into a Forerunner mainframe."

"The teams said it was hell, trying to get to you."

"They had to fight through Flood. No one stays the same after fighting the Flood."

There was a slight pause as Miranda recollected her thoughts. "So why aren't you with John now?"

"He can take care of himself," the AI said, though she sounded as if she half believed it. "I need to make sure you're okay."

"From the reports, I heard that John was living in this new galaxy for about a year," Miranda said.

"He's made some friends too."

"So you've noticed it?"

The AI smiled and nodded. She was only too happy.

****XXxxXX****

****SOL SYSTEM, EARTH, SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**

Jane stood at the Command Bridge in full armour, next to her stood John wearing his new GEN5 exoskeleton. The entire crew was quiet as they watched the Carrier Strike Groups emerge from slipspace. The Sol Fleet was too attack the Reaper fleet from one of Earth's tangents in order to avoid any friend fire.

In the rear of the UNSC formation, were a couple of Alliance Recon Ships, they were at Earth mainly to monitor the battle, and let the reporters tagging along get their scoop.

Earth looked like as if it was on fire. Continents were enshrouded in thick clouds of black smoke, while the coastal areas were lined with a brilliant orange. Shepard shifted her gaze to Europe where dawn was about to appear. All of Britain was covered by rain clouds, something of a relief to the Spectre.

"All units, pincer movement," Lasky ordered over the COMs. "CSG-Earth, come in from the north pole, open fire as soon as you have a clear line of sight. CSG-Venus, attack from the south pole, high orbit."

Green acknowledgement lights winked on the battlemap display. "Acknowledged Admiral."

Prowlers flew in behind the Reapers and dropped their mines before retreating to a safe distance. Reaper Destroyers glided across the empty void, in an attempt to counter UNSC movements.

The first mines detonated, consuming the light capital ships in a fireball. The sheer force of the explosion ripped through Reaper hulls and tossed the debris outwards.

Next to move in were the UNSC destroyers, their main guns lit up and cobalt lances streaked through space. The energy bolts found their targets milliseconds later, bypassing the Kinetic Barriers and melting the armour. The large Cuttlefish shaped ships squirmed and

shook as Archer Missiles impacted across their hull. Streams of ignited thermite boiled away the metal and severed vital systems.

"Enemy fighters are being deployed," said an Ensign, referring to the swarm of Occuli.

"Deploy frigates," Lasky ordered.

Cruisers and Carriers opened their hangar bay doors, tens of frigates glided into space and realigned themselves to the battle. Surging forward, they were going to move in a pincer formation.

"Harbinger isn't here," Shepard whispered.

"I don't think he'd stick around long," John said.

Plumes of smoke and streaks of blue crisscrossed over Earth and smashed into Reaper. Molten metal spewed out like blood. Reach-class cruisers lead the charge, being a descendant of the Infinity-class; they were larger and more powerful.

UNSC ships were now in range of Reaper weapons. Crimson tongues of molten metal streamlined towards UNSC Divinus. The destroyer's shields flared as it shrugged off the attack, a mist of molten metal expanded outwards like fireworks while Commander Keyes ordered her ship to press on.

John smiled at the gutsy tactic. More destroyers were following her lead and headed towards the equator at a forty-five degree angle. UNSC cruiser Pillar of Fire led the charged and rammed into a Reaper at full speed. The two-kilometre long ship screeched under the impact, the superstructure caved in and the ship exploded, washing Pillar of Fire in flame. Jane wondered if the irony was lost on the crew. The cruiser pressed on, guns blazing. Occuli exploded around the ship in the dozens as the point-defence turrets came into play. Reapers concentrated their attack, but the shields just simply shrugged them off.

Keyships surged through the enemy formation, wiping out dozens of Reapers in seconds. To Shepard it was a spectacular sight. Seeing the Sovereign-class Reapers being torn apart effortlessly was quite the morale booster.

"Normandy, this is Majestic, follow us into Earth," said Lasky.

"Copy that," Shepard replied. "Joker, get us there."

The Fight Lieutenant smiled, it was time to put his girl in for a test run. Majestic sailed forth with great speed, portside guns blazing at the Reapers.

Additional frigates outfitted to carry troops down to the planet deployed. Griffin and Claymore Interceptors streamed out of the hangars, half were headed towards the Reapers, and the other half was going to support the ground troops.

"Buckle up boys and girls, we're rolling," Jane grinned.

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****EARTH, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, BRITAIN****

Arca lead his team across the forsaken city. Their armour had been rendered near useless, riddled with bullet holes and scorch marks. They had been forced to tear off their main armour plate components, leaving only the ultra-light body armour on. In essence, they weren't wearing that much more protection than a UNSC Naval officer aboard a ship.

"Not too comfortable with my forearms shown," Greystone muttered.

"My gear is soaked," Lotus said.

The heavy rain over England was pouring down by the galleons, and although the team's clothes rolled water off, it did little to keep them dry.

"I'm more worried about ammo," Arca said. "And that we're running blind."

A growl filled the streets, even with the rain beating down, they could still hear it. The low thump of footfalls, and screeching of metal, whatever was coming, was headed their way and it was big.

Arca flicked on his optics. "Shit."

"What?" Lotus asked.

"Get to cover, this one is big," the Paramilitary Officer said.

The massive Reaperfied thing entered their sights at the end of the avenue. The heavily damaged old English style buildings, the night sky, and the heavy rain seemed to add a menacing effect to the being.

"Days of playing mouse in the English alleyways, and then we run into this fucker," Brian swore.

The prolonged periods of strenuous activities without food or rest, were beginning to take its toll on the team.

Arca peered down his optics and felt a chill run down his spine. It looked like a muscled up Reaper Brute, the size of a Hunter. It four arms, two of which had large rotary canons.

Brian had shared the last of ammunition for the Ember rifles that made about fifty rounds per member. Steel penetrator rounds, hurled by railgun technology could do horrendous amounts of damage. Though scans from the optics said that the Super Brute's armour was extremely dense and tough.

"That's going to be a bitch to take down," Lotus said. "Things a walking tank."

"Anyone's stealth module working?" Arca asked.

"Mines out," Lotus answered.

"So is mine," Greystone added.

The grotesque turian head spun to face the team's position.

"I think it's got a bead on us," Lotus whispered.

Sure enough, the Super Brute roared, slamming its chest. With both armed limbs raised, the gun spun into action. Heavy calibre rounds exploded all around the team, ripping up metal and tossing dirt into the sky.

"How the fuck are we going to take that thing down!" Greystone grunted. "We only have light armour on, no fucking shields."

The COMs began to chatter and spark to life again, albeit filled with static.

"Fifth Element, come in," it was the Chief.

"Chief?" Arca answered, "we're pinned down."

The Operative winced as a shell exploded to close for comfort.

"Cover's getting ropery," he continued, "need immediate assist."

"ETA ten minutes," the Chief replied.

"We'll be dead in five!" Arca said, "Just get here is asap."

"Copy."

Arca quickly surveyed the streets; he spotted an overturned van twenty metres to his left, followed by a store. It'll have to do.

"I'll draw fire, you two move to the van," Greystone volunteered.

The two men nodded.

"Okay, three, two, one go!"

Leaping up from cover, the Operative zeroed in on the turian face and pulled the trigger. The AP rounds managed to take out an eye, and puncture the neck, but since the Super Brute didn't have vitals, it wouldn't go down that easily.

Lotus and Arca sprinted across the road, explosive rounds biting at their heels. But a few shells came in far too close. Lotus could only watch in horror as his long-time friend spun from the impact, left arm torn clear from his body. The Operative felt a burning sensation as a bullet graze past his stomach. He launched himself behind the van and reorientated himself.

Arca felt himself being thrown through the air, his left side

screaming in pain. As he crashed into the ground, his body cried in defiance. He shielded his eyes with his right hand, bits of dirt and debris glanced off his forearm, cutting his skin. Coughing blood, he tried to pull himself up, but his body was failing. Gazing down, he could assess the damage. A one round had past straight through his stomach, curving the amour plates into the wound. His everything below his left shoulder had been shot off, his left arm, a mangled mess.

"Anthony!" Lotus cried. "I got you."

Grabbing his fallen comrade by the neck guard, Lotus dragged Arca to the "safety" of the van. He quickly applied what was left of the biofoam to the wounds. Arca winced as he felt thousands of fire ants tear through his innards before the pain stopped.

"I'll make sure Brian gets out okay," Lotus said.

Arca leaned against a mound of rubble and pulled out his sword and pistol.

"You'll need this," he said, tossing Lotus his sword.

"Thanks."

"Arca?" it was the Chief, his voice crackled over the COMs. "ETA five minutes. We've got you on our sensors."

"Please hurry," Arca muttered, "we're getting torn up here."

The Super Brute had turned its attention to Greystone who was currently the greatest threat to it. The Operative emptied the last of his magazine into the things head, but still it kept on moving. Tossing aside the empty weapon, he unsheathed his blade and ignited the plasma.

He slashed at the Reaperfied being's armour, but realised it was ablative. The plasma fields dispersed and only metal touched metal.

"Fuck," Greystone swore as he cartwheeled to the left.

It was intent on killing him, and with a swift sweeping motion, Greystone was tossed through the air like a ragdoll. A sharp pain ran through his lower back as he was slammed onto the road, and impaled by a piece of rebar.

He turned to face the Super Brute, and swore.

"Eat this fucker."

Greystone hurled his ignited blade, and it ran true. The sword found its mark in the Super Brute's uncovered neck, and burned through some circuits.

The monstrosity howled in pain before bringing its gun to bear. Greystone quickly rolled behind a pile of rubble. Shrapnel and debris rained down on him as the rotary cannons roared.

"Brian, get away from there!" Lotus barked over the TEAMCOM.

A few gunshots impacted on the Super Brute's back, prompting it to turn around. Greystone allowed himself a few seconds of rest, but to his horror, a Reaper loomed ahead, and there were more ground forces incoming.

They're not going to make it in time, Greystone thought.

"For the dust we are," he said over the COMs.

"Wait, Brian, what are you doing?" Bright asked with shock.

With the Super Brutes back turned to him, Greystone leapt onto the beast and rammed his fist down the exposed gap between the shoulder blades. He pulled out as many wires and gore as he could, loosening the head.

The thing roared and howled as it tried to tear off the Operative, but Greystone was in its blind spot. Summoning all of his fading strength, he managed to tear the Super Brute's head off. The monstrosity stumbled aimlessly before crashing into the ground.

"To the dust we shall return," Brian uttered for his team to hear, as he dropped a waterproof parchment.

"Fuck, Brian, what are you doing? Evac is coming," Anthony gasped.

"It won't get here in time. Bright, cover Anthony."

"No wait!"

Ripping the sword from out of the monster, Brian steeled himself and readied his pistol. Running only like his brothers could, he charged into the Reaper horde. He felt his heart pump, and the dull taps of bullets hitting him.

For my brothers!

"Get the fuck back here!" Anthony bellowed.

"Tell them I'm sorry."

"No! Get back here, we can all get out!"

"I'll say hi to ma and pa."

Brian lunged at the first marauder, smashing its shields before sticking his blade into its chest. The Reaper response force turned their attention on him, halting their advance on his stricken friends.

Good, he smiled inwardly.

Northorne entered a state of enlightenment. He didn't feel the need to be savage. He finally felt like he was fighting for something worth it. Every slash of his sword, he cleaved Reaper flesh. He left behind a trail of corpses as he burned through the Reaper ranks. From afar, he could see a new Reaper archetype move into position. They

looked like rachni, bulbous sacks and dual cannons.

"To the dust we shall return," he uttered.

Bright could only watch as he saw Brian's outline be consumed in flame.

"Brian!" He roared.

Anthony lay at his position, gasping for air; he guessed that his lung had been punctured by fragments.

"Bright, I could use some help here," he coughed.

"Coming!"

Anthony could see a bulbous Reaper form crawl from the end of the street he was looking down at. He emptied the last of his pistol mag to pick off a couple of husks. He felt the rain sting his wounds, but he couldn't care. Brian had just died, and now he was hoping that Bright could make it out alive.

Bright sprinted back to Anthony's position, he too spotted the ranged threat, and having depleted the last of his ammunition, there was only one course of action left.

"Eat this you ugly motherfucker!"

He raised his ignited tomahawk, and hurled it down the avenue. The Reaper unit shuddered and flailed as the weapon burst its sac, spilling small swarm like creatures and acid onto the road.

"I'm out!" Bright said. He looked through the rubble, and found a sizeable pylon.

This'll have to do, he thought.

Grabbing the piece of metal, he threw it with all his might, cutting a handful of husks in half.

"ETA one minute," the Chief said over the COM.

****XXxxXX****

****EARTH, WESTMINSTER, LONDON, EN ROUTE TO FIFTH ELEMENT'S POSITION****

Sarah watched from the Osprey's viewport as the _Normandy_ fly overhead to deal with the looming Reaper destroyer.

"Hey Commander," Joker said over the COMs, "looks like someone doesn't want to be part of the party."

"Well that's too bad," Shepard hinted.

"You got it."

The Stealth Destroyers Ion Cannon opened fire, sending a brilliant blue beam through the rainy night and into the smaller vessel. The Reaper ship roared as its _face_ was blown off, Joker decided to

finish the it off with plasma missiles. The blobs of seething hot energy splashed onto the Reaper's hull, instantly boiling away its hull.

"How do you like that you bastard?" Joker cussed freely over the COMs.

Palmer felt Cortez change course. Behind them were at least a few more chinks of Blood Talons and an Armoured Battalion. Squadrons of UNSC birds flew through the howling winds. Firehawks swooped in low and delivered their payload of missile salvos before waving off. Broadsword Gunships circled overhead and fired deep into Reaper territory, while Shortsword bombers conducted CAST missions.

Griffin fighters soared in at blistering speeds with the atmosphere blazing in their wake. They unleashed their tungsten pellets, creating a fiery whip that lashed at the earth.

UCAD-7 Drones surged forward, ahead of the air assault group and cleared a path. Sparrow VTOLs dropped off squads of Tier-One Talons, before lifting off again. The Airborne soldiers took up firing positions and opened up on any Reaper stragglers.

"Palmer, you've got the launcher," the Chief said, handing her the TML.

As the dropship touched down over the remains of a building, Rook and Wizard were the first to step out, laying down a volume of suppressive fire with their SAWs.

"I'll stay here and cover our end, Chief," Shepard said. She gestured to Vega and Garrus to take up firing positions.

"Palmer, on me."

"Copy Chief."

Sarah followed the famed Spartan-II across wartorn London. Along the way, they passed what appeared to be a heavily armed Reaper Brute with four arms.

"Fifth Element!" the Chief called out.

"Over here!" came the reply. "We're under heavy attack!"

"Copy."

There's two, where's the third? Sarah wondered.

Jogging over to the stricken ONISAD Officers, Sarah was slightly shocked at the beating they had taken. They were down to their secondary, ultra-light armour, which meant that their main armour components had been so badly damaged that they were useless. And thus was jettisoned. Hell, judging by the gear, they looked like 21st Century Tier 1s who had been through hell.

The two were pinned by heavy fire, lacking shields wasn't a boon to their predicament. Palmer hefted the TML over her shoulder and squeezed the trigger thrice. The trio of missiles streaked down the

street, and detonated. The massive fireball spread, and a shockwave grumbled through the ground as the buildings crashed onto the road.

"Well there goes Julia," Lotus muttered.

"You named your axe Julia?" Arca coughed.

"It's a tomahawk."

Palmer frowned slightly, it sounded if they were joking, but their tone suggested they were grieving.

"Where's the third one?" Chief asked.

"Dead," Lotus said.

The one identified as Arca looked like hell, his entire left arm was missing and there was a puncture on his abdomen.

"C'mon, we need to get you back to the ship."

Lotus gently eased Arca off the ground. The heavily wounded officers grunted in pain as they slowly made their way back to the Osprey. Additional UNSC forces had arrived. Airborne had set up portals so that heavy armour could roll onto the field.

Palmer watched as an Atlas Ultra-Heavy Tank appeared from a contained slipspace portal. The six-tread behemoth opened fire with its tri-barrelled guns. Thunderous claps roared through the air as the tank levelled a large building.

The awaiting crew shot worried glances at Arca as he was carried on board by Lotus. Palmer couldn't believe he was still conscious. Bio scans suggested that he should be out cold.

Even though Earth had been retaken, the ride back to _Normandy_ was deathly quiet.

****XXxxXX****

"_You don't get it do you? I've watched the Flood evolve! They can assimilate Artificial Intelligence now. They're like us! Why do you think I've devoted years in trying to stop them?"
>_**-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_Maybe the solution is simpler than you think."
>_**-Admiral Orlenda Parangosky**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Quick question, what are your thoughts on:
>ONISAD? Specifically Fifth Element.
MJLONIR GEN5
Armour?****

****Post a review and let me know.****

****A/N:** When I refer to Ultra-light body armour, I mean the one similar to what the UNSC officers wear in Halo4.**

****ONISAD** off-duty fatigues are basically a cross between the UNSC officer's garb and what the S4s wear.**

****Dress-uniform:** Less casual than Ceremonial dress, but more formal than regular fatigues.

>Ceremonial dress: Worn to functions, ceremonies and other formal events.
Fatigues: Practically casual clothing, worn with combat armour.**

****GEN5 Armour,** well, you see, I must confess. I'm an artist with words, not so much with drawings. Hence I'm going to have to describe it in words.

>It has a utilitarian look. Sleek, fearsome and little of the undersuit is exposed. The undersuit is of a dark grey colour and looks a bit like the nanosuit.
Armour plates cover most of the suit; the plates are a deep faded green with a hint of grey. Try and imagine a cross between the MJOLNIR MarkVI and Didact's armour.**

â€|

****I** would also like to add that I had not originally planned for killing Greystone off. It's just when I was writing the last chapter, it turned out that way.**

****XXXXXX****

"_Parangosky set you up for this, didn't she?"
>_**-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_Orders are orders, Don."
>_**-Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge**_

"_No one questioned the Spartan-Twos during the war. Why all the sudden interest?"
>_**- LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_Some of the Brass can't sleep at night."
>_**-Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge**_

"_Well talk to Parangosky, she greenlighted the programsâ€| and let's not forget the Threes. She greenlighted that. I don't see why my mother has to answer for these _crimes_."
>_**- LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_Off the record, Sully, Hood and a few others, have you and your mother covered."
>_**-Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge**_

"_Then this interview is unnecessaryâ€| I'll see you at lunch."

>_**- LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

****XXXXXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, SOL SYSTEM, IN ORBIT OF EARTH****

A slow and steady stream of wounded Alliance soldiers and civilians filled out as the Ospreys touched down in the hangar. UNSC Marines herded the people through neural checkpoints to check for any indoctrinated presence. So far, no one was a positive match, a good thing in Keyes's mind.

The Doctor could see more UNSC Fleets drop out of slipspace and enter orbit around Earth. Logistical and Auxiliary Fleets were clearing away Reaper debris. Stratosentinels moved the debris and welded them together, creating a planetoid of Reaper ships

Once everything had been cleared, Keyships opened fire with their plasma turrets. Bolts of cobalt slowly arced from the massive ships and splashed onto the ball of _seafood_. What was once flesh, broke and burned away. Eventually, all that was left was a sphere of molten metal.

Keyes watched as the _Normandy_ docked inside _Majestic's_ hangar and quickly jogged towards it.

"Liara, c'mon," he beckoned.

"Just a moment," the Asari said, tending to a child's wound.

She quickly stitched the cut, applied a salve of medi-gel and smiled. "You'll be okay."

"Thank you," the boy said.

Liara gave the mother a reassuring look before running after Essingdon. As the ramps of the _Normandy_ descended, a small group of Spartans exited. The Chief lead the pack, rifle in hand, with Shepard flanking his left. Behind him were two walking wounded, which Keyes immediately recognised as his old friends.

Anthony was limping across the bright bluish grey floors, coughing his lungs out.

"To stubborn to get a stretcher," Bright said, answering the unanswered question.

Essingdon quickly waved down a Med-evac Sparrow, as the craft landed, the draft from the winds billowed against the Doctor's lab coat. He led Bright and Anthony onto the VTOL before jumping into one of the seats. Easing the bird off the ground, the pilot aimed the VTOL towards the Spartan Medical Facility.

"What the hell happened on the ground?" Keyes asked, "Where's Brian?"

"Dead," Bright answered, yelling over the turbofans.

"Shit," Keyes muttered sadly. "Anthony, how are you holding?"

"Bleeding's stopped, but I'm having trouble breathing," the Operative answered.

"We'll get you patched up."

â€|

"How does it feel Shepard?" Liara asked, pacing around the hangar.

Jane's helmet disassembled itself and retracted into the armour.

"What does what feel?"

"Earth, it's back in your hands now."

The Spectre pondered the question. The Reapers were swept aside like nothing more than flies. The fight on the ground was short, somewhat anti-climactic. In fact, ever since the Coalition got involved, everything had been easy, workload wise that is.

"Great, I guess," Shepard said solemnly, "but it's not going to bring them back."

"You can't save everyone," Liara said, "I'm sorry about Ash."

Jane glanced down at her armoured boots, looked to John who was grabbing new equipment and then gazed back to Liara.

"She died for nothing."

The Asari didn't have an answer or a statement to that. She knew what had happened. Ashley's death was in vain.

"Jane," Liara said, using her Shepard's first name, "hold on to those closest to you. And you'll be in good company when it's all over."

Another Osprey entered the expansive hangar. The doors opened and a team of N7s jogged out, followed by Admiral Anderson. Shepard smiled as she saw her mentor again and quickly took the elevator down to the main landing.

Jane remembered that the last time they had seen each other; Anderson was about a few inches taller. But now, she towered over him. _Guess it's something I'll have to get used too_, she thought.

"Shepard," he smiled, "been working out?"

Jane chuckled at the joke, and shook Anderson's hand.

"Good to see you again."

The Admiral turned his attention on the _Normandy_ and whistled.

"They sure have worked wonders for you," he said.

"C'mon, they've got nice cafeterias here. And a golf course."

Anderson perked up.

â€|

****SPARTAN MEDICAL BAY-01****

Keyes gently eased Anthony onto the medical recliner. The chair readjusted itself in order to fit the contours of his body, as it moved him into a supine position. The Doctor isolated the area by raising cubicle dividers, and dimming down the lights a notch. Anthony's pupils had contracted, indicating extreme sensitivity.

First Edmund, now Brian, Essingdon thought sadly.

"Does your family know?" he asked.

Anthony took in a deep breath; he knew exactly what Keyes was talking about. And so, he shook his head lightly.

"Does Julia know?" Keyes asked.

"No. She doesn't even know we're ONI."

Essingdon looked at Bright across the hall, getting his stomach wounds treated. Pressing a few buttons on the console, he injected more anaesthetics and blood type O into the wounded Operative.

"Are you going to tell her?" Donnie asked softly.

Anthony sighed, a small tear streamed down his cheek.

"I wish I could leave, but there's nothing left for me on the other side."

"So you managed to talk to Delilah then."

Stanforth nodded softly. "I told her that I was happy for her. That she deserved to have someone who would be more of a best friend to her."

"Poetic," Keyes said softly, "you never told her how you felt?"

"Don, I haven't seen her for decades, she's moved on," Anthony reasoned, "it would be pointless for me to hold onto those emotions."

A sadden expression spread across Essingdon's face. He let out a low sigh, and looked at his friend.

"Those emotions are what makes us human," Keyes pointed out.

"You say that as if humanity's soul is pure and good," Anthony said with a light scoff, "you know what this world's like. We give up everything so that people can live in ignorant bliss. We give up everything, even our memories and our lives, so that people can sleep in their beds at night."

"Do you really believe the Innies are a threat?"

"You and I both know that we keep the Innies around to stop new

players entering the field. It's twisted, I know. But at least it lets people sleep; it lets kids grow up carefree."

"What happened to Brian?"

"London was hell," Anthony began, "we lost so many people on the ground. I lead my chaps to safety, but we got pinned. Brian used himself as a distraction to buy more time for evac."

"Then he didn't die in vain."

"I hope not," Anthony said softly, "I still want Bright to have his life."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since he joined Fifth, Brian and Oswald made sure that they went on recon missions. I volunteered for more wetwork. When I lost the guys under my command and Oswald was killed, I was transferred to Fifth."

"You guys wanted to protect him. It doesn't work like that you know."

"He's never shot a kid before, and I plan on keeping it that way," Anthony said sternly, "I want him to transfer to some different division. Frontline is better than what we do."

"You know Edmund and Carter are dead?"

"Shit," Anthony sighed. Centuries of experience allowed the Operative to quickly draft up a hypothesis. "Any leads?"

"None so far," Essingdon said, but his tone suggested otherwise. "Northfold was attacked, only Edmund's people were targeted."

Anthony threw the doctor a glance, signifying that they were on the same page.

"They've never played it this close to their chests before," the Paramilitary Officer said, "give me the details later. This isn't something we should be talking about here."

Keyes let out a long sigh, and changed the topic.

"So do you want a flash cloned arm? Or prosthetics?"

"Prosthetics. Arm takes too long to regrow."

"Only an hour," Donnie said, placing a hand on the counter.

"I can do more with a robotic arm though."

Essingdon winced inwardly as he understood the cryptic message laced within the statement. It was a sign that Anthony was becoming detached.

****XXxxXX****

****UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, MAIN DOCKS, PORT 12 (SSV
NORMANDY-SR2****)****

Still in full armour, Palmer looked at the datapad displaying the transference email. She'd still retained her tactical Command over the Spartan-IVs, but she'll be riding shotgun with ONISAD. ONISAD, they're both military and paramilitary. They have no official rank, but their tactical command level outranked most senior officers.

They were also notorious for wiping out entire Spartan-IV Squads in wargames. Their brutality and efficiency was something to be reckoned with.

As she walked towards the docked Normandy with her kit bag slung over her shoulder, she saw a tall figure of oriental descent, luminous blue eyes, and neatly cut hair, waiting for her. She also noticed that his attire was similar to off-duty fatigues of Spartan-IVs, except his outfit was deep grey digital livery and he also wore ultra-light armour. Strapped to his right thigh, was a holster for his sidearm. She recognised him as Arca, or Anthony.

"Welcome to Fifth Element," he said with a smile. It seemed genuine.

"Glad to be here, Stanforth," Sarah said neutrally. "Docs let you out already?"

"A quick patch up."

Sarah shrugged lightly. "I wouldn't call getting a new limb, a quick patch up."

The Paramilitary Officer led her up onto the Normandy's ramps, and towards the elevator, as the doors closed shut, he asked her a question. "So why did you accept? I didn't expect you too."

"Three guys, who are supposed to be inferior, take out a team of experienced Fours in melee. I want to know how."

Stanforth frowned, not fully satisfied with the answer.

"Look, all you need to worry about, is that I'll carry out my job."

"Appreciated, Sarah," Anthony said as the elevator stopped on their floor.

"First name basis already?"

"Ground rules," Anthony explained, "we use first names or middle names when referring to anyone in ONISAD when off-duty. You tap into TEAMCOM and you won't hear anyone using last names."

"So is this a thing in ONISAD?"

"First names are just as anonymous as callsigns."

"So, am I under your command?" Sarah asked.

"Technically, I'm not in command. I'm just team leader, your boss."

Palmer pondered over the answer. "So you guys use the conventions of bureaucracy then?"

Anthony nodded. The elevator doors parted, and Sarah was lead towards the private billets where Fifth Element was staying at.

"I'll get the boffins to deliver your new gear here, soon."

"Eggheads didn't get the work done yet?" Palmer scoffed.

"Gear for ONISAD isn't readily available," Anthony explained, "we're still waiting on our own repairs. That means you will wear our armour."

Palmer paused for a bit, "so how is it going to work in the field?"

"I call the shots," Anthony answered, "but officially, you don't need to obey my orders."

"You have a messed up hierarchy."

"Certain formalities have a habit of getting in the way of things. Something you can't afford when you're running with us. You're one of us now."

"How comforting," Sarah said sarcastically.

The doors opened and revealed the private lounge. It had been intricately decorated with oak wood panels, reflective white walls and streamlined furniture. Bright was sitting at a desk, reading a news article. When he had heard the doors opened, he quickly got up from his seat turned around. Palmer noted that he was armed, and wore the same attire as Anthony.

Bright quickly nudged his shoulder pad and asked. "Who's he?"

"FNG," replied Anthony.

"Callsign?"

Palmer shook her head.

"Doesn't have one, yet," Stanforth explained.

"So why do we need a new guy?" Bright asked, walking over. "No one can replace Greystone."

"We're not replacing him. She was going to be assigned to us regardless." Anthony said.

Bright scanned his eyes up and down Palmer. She was used to the gawks from men, but the Operatives' gaze seemed cold, calculative and analytical, not to the same extent as Anthony's but it was there. She knew she was in a whole different league now. Professionalism, as ONI

would like to call it.

"She? Thought ONISAD was a guy club."

Sarah's armour folded back, revealing her face. Bright looked her in the eyes, practically glaring.

"Don't think you can fill in his shoes," he said coldly, before heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" Anthony asked.

Bright looked at his friend. "We need to go see Julia; someone's got to tell her, her brother died."

Sarah immediately recalled how the Operative named his tomahawk, Julia. Must be someone close, she thought, didn't see that one coming.

"We need to put on a suit then," Anthony said. He then turned to Palmer. "Did you bring your gear?"

"She doesn't need to come with us," Bright interrupted.

"I think she should," Anthony said sternly, though he didn't raise his voice, "she needs to get into the swing of things."

"Fine."

Palmer watched as the two men leave to get change. She decided to detach her armour plates of the body suit. Gently she stacked her armour to one side, before opening her kitbag. It was obvious to her that Bright had taken a disliking towards her. Somehow, it made him look more human.

Sarah pulled on the black dress uniform that all Spartan's wore (not to be confused with ceremonial dress). The lack of a chrome stripe running down the left chest was an indication that she is not a Spartan-II. After strapping her holster to her right thigh, she slid her SOCOM pistol inside and slid the strap shut. Finally, she pulled on the ultra-light vest armour, shoulder pads with insignia, and knee high boots, equipped with knee pads.

A door behind her parted open, allowing Anthony to enter. He was wearing pretty much the same thing as Sarah was, black suit and ultra-light armour, accept his shirt was black and there were no insignias.

"Leaving your armour here?" Anthony asked.

"I'll get an engineer to pick it up later."

Bright was already in the hallway, waiting for them. He had used another passage to get to the elevator, bypassing the private lounge.

The walk back to the bustling hangar was a tense one. Navigating their way onto the Osprey docking bay, Bright signalled towards a waiting Dropship. Anthony and Sarah sat in the hold, while Bright

moved up to the cockpit. The doors hissed shut, and the engines spooled up.

****XXxxXX****

"_Fours are lame. You guys seem like gung-ho marines on steroids."

>_******-Lotus â€" Bright Qin Zhou******_

"_You're an S-Four."

>_******-Paul Demarco******_

"_S-Fours lack professionalism... 'cept for Thorne. I like him."

>_******-Lotus â€" Bright Qin Zhou******_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** There, to those of you who wanted drama and a bit of romance, I put it in there for you. I hope it's not too cheesy or fluffy.******

****As always, please review.****

33. Names

****A/N:** Can't believe I totally missed this during my rewriteâ€¦ I first described Shepard having black hairâ€¦ and there were variations in eye colour.******

****MEleeSmasher, you're the 600****th**** reviewer****

"_The Composer, the Forerunners quest to achieve immortality. The Positronic Brain Lattice designed by my son, is based off that technology. He did not believe that we should inhabit a digital world, but that we should utilise it to enhance our own. Our bodies became stronger, our minds became faster, we are no longer humanâ€¦ we are Reclaimers."

>_******-Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey******_

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD OSPREY DROPSHIP, EN ROUTE TO UNSC ****_**SWIFT WINDS**_****

Sitting in the side seat, Palmer watched Anthony mentally disassemble and reassemble his prosthetic arm. The synthetic skin on his left hand would _melt_ and recede into his arms, revealing a sleek, near seamless jet black arm. Detaching the casing and revealing the titanium structure laced with the blue glow of the Positronic Brain, the gauntlet would float in mid-air, and split into smaller fragments. The Operative's arm disassembled itself autonomously and reformed into a double edged blade, before returning to the look of a human hand.

"Having fun there?" Sarah asked.

Stanforth looked up at her and shrugged.

"Alright, I need to ask you something," Palmer stated.

"Shoot," Anthony gestured.

"ONISAD is all clandestine and secretive, right?"

The Paramilitary Officer nodded at the Spartan-IV.

"So why are you going to tell someone that their brother is dead?"

"She's my cousin."

Palmer raised an eyebrow at the answer. "And so you guys don't feel the need to cover up your identity or anything?"

"With T-One's, we don't bother," Anthony explained, "everyone just assume we're Spartan-Fours."

"So does she know?"

"Who?"

"Julia, does she know you're ONI?"

Stanforth shook his head lightly. "She thinks Bright is a Spartan-IV, and that Brian and I are doctors for a pharmaceutical company. I haven't seen her for years, centuries even."

"Then why are you going to tell her?"

"I'd be a dick if I didn't tell her," Anthony said.

Palmer shot him a look.

"Okay, I might be a dick," Stanforth confessed, "but this means a lot to Bright. This is his fianc   we're talking about."

"How many regs are you breaking by doing this?"

Anthony mulled over the question. "One, but there's a loop hole."

A silence filled the hold, before Palmer broke it. "Do you have Brian's body?"

"Etri," Anthony corrected himself, "We only have a skeleton. Fhajad said he brought it to _Swift Winds_, he's waiting for us there already."

Palmer felt a strange tension in the air, but didn't bother to mention it. The Osprey entered the brightly lit hangar bay of the UNSC Destroyer, and touched down on a clear landing pad. The rear doors parted open, allowing the group to walk out.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Anthony asked.

Bright nodded.

The group spotted Fhajad wearing dress uniform, waving towards them. He stood at the far side of the hangar, next to an elevator and what

appeared to be a coffin.

"Fhajad," Bright greeted.

"Gents, Palmer," Fhajad said in return. He then held out his right hand, and clasped in his gentle grip, was a parchment. "Sandman found this on the ground; you might want to take a look."

Anthony gently reached out and read the parchment out aloud for the group to hear.

"Hey guys, if you're reading this, well it's obvious one of you stole it. Or I am gone. If it's the former, then give it back to me you dick. If it's the later, then I'm sorry."

The statement earned a sad chuckle out of Bright and Anthony.

"There's not much for me to say, but that I wish you guys all the best. And Anthony, keep watch over Bright. He still has a shot at having a family. Tell Julia I'm sorry that I couldn't spend more time with her and my parents. With great love and admiration, Etrius Michael Manh."

Sarah watched as _Anthony_ pinch the bridge of his nose, fold the parchment, and place it gently in the coffin's pocket. She frowned slightly. _Of course, ONISAD always change their names_. _Shit, why didn't I think of that sooner?_ She thought.

"A few chaps from detail will take the coffin away," Fhajad said softly, and wheeled the coffin to another group of coffins. Some were brown, some were black. Palmer could tell that _Swift Winds_ had been given the task of ferrying the bodies to a logistics fleet.

"Let's go," _Anthony_ said sadly.

The elevator ride up to the bridge was held within a deafening silence. Sarah wished that someone would just come to them and ask what they were doing, or something along those lines. But her insignia, and the general outlook of Fifth Element, warded off just about everyone.

There were just too many people coming in and out of the ships to be kept track of, Sarah wondered if Julia knew that her fianc  was here. Finally, an ensign stopped them.

"Excuse me; are you looking for anyone in particular?" She asked.

"Yes," Palmer said kindly, she wanted this to be over; the tension was driving her mad. "We're here to see Commander Julia Manh."

"I'll get her right away ma'am," the redhead said, "please wait in room four. Wesley will show you the way."

The ship board AI appeared, and guided them to a moderately lit room, before _disappearing_. _Anthony_ and _Bright_ sat down at the glass table, while Sarah stood behind them.

"Can't believe we're doing this," _Anthony_ muttered.

"We'll if you feel that way, why don't you leave!" _Bright_ snapped. He took a breath before apologising. "Sorry, I didn't mean toâ€|"

"Don't worry about it," _Anthony_ reassured.

The doors to the room parted open, and in walked a woman who was of British and Oriental descent. She had deep brown eyes, black hair, flawless skin and a high cheekbone face.

Sarah read Julia's expression as she spotted the two men with luminous blue eyes.

"Palmer? Bryce? Adrian?" Manh seemed more surprised that her cousin was of the same build as her fiancÃ©. "What are you guys doing here?" Her voice had dropped a level the moment she picked up on the mood. "Adrian, I thought you were out on Dantess."

Sarah could see his expression, it could be effectively translated into; _I haven't been called Adrian for a very long time_.

Anthony or Adrian shook his head lightly. "Bryce wants you to know the truth."

"The truth about what?" the moment those words left Julia's lips, her eyes widened in horror. "What happened to Etrius?"

"Killed," Bryce said, "he died at London, buying us time to get to evac."

Julia slowly sat down at the table opposite to them. Her face softened to a sad expression, but not tears flowed from her eyes. Sarah could understand why, Etrius had distant himself from his family since he became a part of ONISAD.

"I'm so sorry, Julia," Adrian said.

"Who are you?" Julia glared daggers at Adrian.

"Paramilitary Officer, or Operative Anthony Stanforth Zhuge, callsign Arca," Adrian said with sad eyes.

"Did you rope Etrius into this?" she asked coldly.

"They approached us, and offered us a position," Adrian answered.

Sarah could guess why Adrian was telling Julia what he was telling. He was getting tired and weary, that it was almost hard to miss.

Julia then turned to face Bryce, "and how'd you get involved?"

"Same deal."

Another tension began to build up, before it was quickly defused by Adrian. "Julia, if it makes you feel any better. Etrius and I have made sure that Bryce is broken."

"What do you mean?" Bryce asked, he didn't like being left out of the loop.

"We knew you had someone you loved on the outside, and we didn't want that to be taken from you," Adrian explained, "Oswald took up recon work for Fifth, while I volunteered for more wetwork."

That explains everything, Palmer thought.

"I appreciate that, Adrian," Julia said sincerely.

"I'll let you two talk, figure things out from there," Adrian said softly, he turned to face Bryce. "If you want to leave, I won't hold it against you."

"When this war's over, then we'll talk about it," Bryce said. The two entered a silent agreement as Adrian got up from his chair. He walked towards the door, and gestured at Palmer to follow him.

The elevator ride back down to the main hangar bay was silent, the doors parted open, and the two stepped into the cavernous space.

"Let's head back, Palmer," Adrian sighed.

"I thought we're on a first name basis," Sarah joked lightly.

"If you're last name has a nice ring to it, I'll probably use it more when we're off-duty."

"Uh, thanks? I guess. So what should I call you then?"

"I don't think I want to be called Anthony anymore."

"So?"

"Adrian."

"Isn't that against regs?"

Adrian shook his head.

****XXxxXX****

"_My work saved humanity, my son's work gave us another purpose."

>_**-Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey, referring to the rescue/recovery mission for Cortana**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Hey everyone, I know this chapter is lacking in blockbuster action, but I think we can lay off that for a bit.****

****So what do you think of it?****

****Post a review and let me know.****

****~Andrithir****

****P.S: The two new Xovers I posted, they have little relations to
Lost Legacy****.****

34. Why Join Us?

****A/N: This is more or less a character development chapter of
Commander Sarah Palmer. Just thought I'd let you know. There's no
blockbuster action here.****

****Quick note so we're all on the same page.****

****(Arca) Anthony Stanforth Zhuge's real name is Adrian James Chen**

**>(Greystone) Brian Northorne Zhuge's real name is Etrius Michael
Manh
(Lotus) Bright Qin Zhou's real name is Bryce Tian
Liang****

****Obviously when you see them in the quotes, they'll be referred to
as their assigned name (assigned names will also be italicised from
now on). Any confusions, please PM asap so I can clear things up for
you.****

****XXxxXX****

**"_Thank you, for everything you have done."
>_**-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes, to The
Librarian**_**

****XXxxXX****

****SOL SYSTEM, IN ORBIT OF EARTH, UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, ROYAL
FIELDS****

With Earth retaken, it felt like a new hope had been rekindled. News of the Coalition's crushing victory was spreading fast, as they advanced on Reaper held systems. But Jane knew that the turning of tides could not hold forever. The Coalition can only be stretched so far.

"Take a break Shepard," Anderson said.

The two were sitting at a table, overlooking a vast recreation country club. It still amazed Shepard that the UNSC would decide to give up so much space for a place for soldiers to relax and unwind.

"Sorry, Anderson, just thinking," Jane said, tugging at her Alliance uniform.

"About what?" he asked, staring out towards the spectacular golf course.

"Everything that has happened."

David leaned back into his chair, and took a swill from his drink.

"We're no longer on the run, Shepard."

Jane shifted in her seat, her hair fluttering in the artificial wind.

"Shepard, I know that Ashley and Kaidan mean a lot to you, but dwelling on their death is not what they want," the Admiral said.

Shepard smiled softly; her mentor always knew what was going through her mind. "There's been a lot on my mind lately. Especially what happened at the Citadel."

"Udina betrayed us all," Anderson said, "but you did the right thing, for making him face the music."

â€|

****COMMAND BRIDGE****

Lasky stood at the battlemat, scanning his eyes across the display. So far there had been minimal UNSC casualties, but the processing of civilians was taking a very long time. High Command needed to be sure that there would not be any indoctrinated presence on Earth otherwise many lives would be at risk.

"Commander Palmer," Thomas greeted the Spartan-IV as she entered the bridge.

"Admiral Lasky," Palmer said with equal measure. She waked up to the display table and leaned against it.

"Heard you accepted the transfer," Lasky said.

Sarah nodded.

"You know you're going to be working alongside one of the longest serving wetwork operatives, right" Thomas whispered.

"I know Tom," Palmer said. "So how do you know him?"

"A while back, I was with a team of scientist, Doctor Orton, Doctor Thorkais, Professor Wright and Doctor Anders. A couple of Innies managed to get the jump on us when we were at base camp."

"Yeah, I heard about that one," Sarah said, "ONI believed that there were leaks in the system."

Thomas nodded. "Well, they send in Second Element and Third Element, to pull us out. During the few weeks we were laying low. I learnt their identities. Orton and Arca knew each other since they were kids. Small world huh?"

Of course, Lasky couldn't say anymore, but Palmer got the message. Clandestine for ONISAD became their only life. _No wonder Adrian wants Bryce to leave_.

"I noticed that the way the team survives, is that they talk during downtime. Just a tip."

"Alright, I'll see you around Tom," Sarah said before

leaving.

â€|

****OBSERVATION DECK 008****

Bright leaned against the pillar, next to the windows overlooking Earth. His birthplace was still in flames, but at least the Reapers were no longer there. He was wearing the standard dress uniform, while cradling his ring in his palm.

"How'd it go, _Bright_?" Adrian asked, entering the darkened lounge. He walked up to his friend, and leaned against the adjacent support.

"I'm going to be dad," Bryce smiled.

Adrian's expression beamed into pure joy. "I'm happy for you, really."

"I know."

"So how'd she take it?"

Bright's gaze shifted to the timber floor. "Etrius had estranged himself from the family. Julia's still in shock, still numb from the news."

"Then why aren't you with her?" Adrian questioned.

"She has to get back to work, we're meeting up later. Talk things over."

The hum of _Majestic_'s engines filled the lounge as the two lapsed into a comfortable silence.

"So are you going to leave?"

Bright knew exactly what the question meant. "I don't know, are you sure you're going to be okay by yourself?"

"Palmer's here," Adrian shrugged.

"_Anthony_, she doesn't count," _Bright_ said.

"I know, but we've taken a lot of casualties lately. We're running dry on replacements."

"Then I'll stay."

"No," Adrian said sternly. "Bryce, when this is over, promise me, you'll transfer to the Spartan branch."

Bryce closed his eyes, mulling over the request. "I promise," he said sincerely.

A soft and relieved expression spread across Adrian's face. For the first time in a long time, he felt that he had finally done something _right_.

"Look, I got to go," Bryce said, "I'll see you when we ship out."

Adrian gave a curt nod as Bryce left through the doors, leaving him alone in the observation deck.

"Wish you were here to see it, Etrius," he said softly, gazing at London.

The Operative could hear Sarah and Bryce meet in the hallway; their greetings were cold and hollow, more so on Bryce's end. He was still taking Etrius's death pretty hard.

"Adrian," Sarah said, easing herself onto a bench next to him.

"Sarah," Adrian said with whatever kindness he could muster. "Don't hold too him, but he hasn't lost that many people."

"I know," Palmer said, "he's changed."

"He'll adapt, I've seen this before."

"I just hope it's not too late," Adrian whispered. He desperately hoped that his friend still had a chance at having a semblance of a normal life.

"Why do you want him to leave so badly," Sarah said, getting up from the bench. She rested her shoulder against the pane of glass, standing a few feet away from Adrian.

The Operative looked at her, and let out a soft sigh.

"We've known each other for years," Palmer said, reduce the unease, "however during most of that time, I've known you as Arca or _Anthony_."

"And don't forget the remarks you made," Adrian added.

"Yeah," Sarah said, rolling her shoulders, "sorry 'bout that."

"You don't need to apologise."

"Well, since we're having a heart to heart, you might as well spill," Palmer said.

Adrian raised an eyebrow. Palmer would make such an excellent diplomat, too bad she hated politics.

"Have you ever shot a child?" Adrian asked bluntly.

Sarah could feel her skin crawl at the notion. She shook her head softly.

"I have, and it never gets easier. You never get used to it."

"I don't think any sane person would want too," Palmer said.

"What makes it worse is that the kids are drugged up on a high. Conventions and politics don't apply to you since you're not a

soldier."

"When that first round passes over your head, shit hits the fan, you do everything you can to get your people out alive," Sarah commented softly. "Adrian, when was the last time you saw a shrink?"

"Three months ago, I guess," he shrugged, "but it doesn't help."

"PTSD?" Palmer asked, every moment that passed, she got to more of the secretive world, where only weary, ghostly haunted souls roamed.

"Borderline," Adrian replied.

Sarah spotted a dark liquid collecting at the bottom of his eyes, she quickly covered her gaping mouth as she realised it was blood. _How broken is he?_ She wondered. _How broken are they?_

"It's hard to believe he's gone," Adrian whispered. "We've been through a lot together, and then he gets killed by something easily avoided."

Palmer tugged at her shirt' collar, it was strange to be wearing light clothing over her bodysuit.

"It's funny," Adrian said, "you're out exploring the galaxy, wiping out the alien threat. But me? I'm cleaning house, destroying families."

"You do what you have to."

"Do you really believe that?" Adrian asked, "When training kicks in, we're machines. And when it's gone, we're left dealing with the shards." There was a long pause before he continued again. "Look, Sarah, I don't mean to burden you with my emotional issues butâ€¦"

"But I'm the closest thing to a confidant."

Adrian nodded, "I don't want _Bright_ to have any more worries."

"I understand."

"I wouldn't be telling you these things if I didn't trust you."

A small smile curled on Sarah's lips. "Soon to trust?"

"You trust those with you completely, or you don't. There's no room for halves here."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Twelve ONISAD Paramilitary Officer Casualties so far, I witness five, because they all died on the same day. Their bodies were never recovered. From a hospital bed, I watched as the Innies dragged their bodies through the streets."

"I saw that report too; ONI covered it as Aid Workers killed."

"Are you sure you want to be a part of this?" Adrian asked.

"Experience everything."

"This is something you don't want to experience."

"Adrian, I'm a big girl, I think I'll be fine."

The Operative sighed, staring at her with his weary blue eyes. She looked at him, with proud brown eyes.

"Okay, so why do you want to tag along so badly?" Adrian asked, "I've spilled my end."

"I guess it's only fair," Palmer agreed. "My parents weren't big fans of the UNSC, I didn't share their views."

"You became a jarhead, exceptional physical prowess and tactical ability," Adrian stated, "I've read your file."

"Well, I have to ask, why did you join? And why the name Anthony?"

"Focusing on me again? Fine. My father was part of ONI, never saw him around much, but he was a nice guy to be around with. So when they offered me a position, I took it. It was a chance for me to be closer to dad." Adrian paused, wiping away another tear of blood, "the last thing he said to me was this, 'leave, while you still have a soul. I won't be offended if you called your friends.'"

Palmer's skin crawled again. She could accurately guess what had happened. But still, she would not be deterred. And the broken man standing in front of her, he was no monster, just a man who got the short straw.

"The name Anthony, well, my great-great-great-great-grandfather's name, was Anthony. He was a writer and the Director of ONI during the uprising."

"You mean the best-selling author, Anthony?" Sarah asked with a slight surprise.

Adrian nodded.

"I never would've guessed. His stories are hilarious."

Adrian smiled softly. "So why do you want to join so badly? You've voiced your hatred of spooks many times in the past."

Sarah folded her arms, and looked at him. "Well that's before I got to know what was under the mask. You're not as scary as everyone thinks you are."

"We instigated none of those rumours."

"Look, Adrian. I appreciate you for warning me of the dangers. But Crimson was killed on the Citadel. I want to find the bastards who did it."

The Operative closed his eyes. He never considered Palmer to be one of those types who'd take things personally.

"Was this the team on Requiem?"

"No. This team was the one on Earth. Those bastards killed my cousin. So I know how it feels," Sarah said sincerely.

"Well that's enough heart for me tonight," Adrian said, "I got to go wash up, I'll see you on the _Normandy_."

****XXxxXX****

"_Five ONISAD Operatives and Six SpecWar Teams were lost that day. We never got their bodies back. Innies are doing god knows what to them as we speak."

>_**-Admiral Orlenda Margaret Parangosky**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:****

****In Shepard's moment of ascension, few taste the bitterness of hateâ€¦ I ask why. I am Andrithir, writer, where there is an interesting fandom, we strive to gift it pseudo-realism. Our concepts are a luminous sun, to which all intelligence blossoms, and the impervious shelter beneath which, it has prospered. I stand before you, accused of the sin, of insuring her greatness of attempting to save us, from this imbalanced wank/stomp-fest in which we are forced toâ€¦ recede.****

****Wank/stomp-fest writers stand as the greatest threat of this fandom, refusing to eradicate them is a fool's gambit. We squander months to intricately build our lore, while they seize our triumphs for their own.****

****The mountain of responsibility for all thingsâ€¦ belongs to us non-wanking stomping fest writers alone. Think of my acts as you will, but do not doubt the reality. The wanking and stomping, has already begunâ€¦ and we are hopeless to stop it.****

â€¦

****Sorry guys, I just couldn't help myself. XD. I just had to paraphrase and parody The Didact. But my message is clear.****

****I have seen a rise in stories that have taken concepts from other writers, who have dedicated hours of creating a balanced and intricate lore for their story, taken and turned into some mindless wank/stomp fest that is not so intricately written (to put things lightly). I won't go into the specifics, but I'm sure many of you readers can relate.****

****Also, it has come to my attention that there is a small number out there who aren't happy that I've made Shepard a Spartan-IVâ€¦ I ask why. You see, I don't want Shepard to be in the shadow of the Chief, hence the augmentations.****

****Well that's all for now. Oh and the "Conference segment, will be**

put in later"***

Please leave a review and let me know of your opinions on wank/stomp-fest stories.

35. Sur'Kesh

**A/N: Gratuitous violence you desire? Gratuitous violence you shall receive!

>Conference you desire? Seeks to write about conferenceâ€¦ maybe next chapter.

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"_Catalyst Ammunition, a personal favourite of ONISAD. Contained within the metal case or the hard-light shell, is a unique type of radiation that literally dissolves the victim into luminous coloured ash (either cobalt or ember), before vaporising. The Radiation targets the subject's central nervous system, making it particularly effective in helping the removal of bodies, and hindering Flood expansion._

Cobalt Catalyst Rounds does not have the same devastating effect as Gold Catalyst Rounds. The purpose being is that there are times when targets are needed to be taken alive. Hence, whenever a subject is hit with the CCR, only a small portion will be vaporise, whereas complete vaporisation will occur with GCR. That being said, Catalyst Modules for DEW and Catalyst rounds for ballistic weapons are extremely expensive, and that the Modules have a tendency to overheat rapidly.

But that is not the only flaw. Positronic Brain Lattice dampens catalyst effects quickly, rendering it virtually useless on those with the implants.

_Addendum: Positronic Brain Lattice that have been assimilated by Flood form, will no longer dampen catalyst."

>_**-UNSC Military Report on Catalyst Munitions**_

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ABOARD SSV **_NORMANDY SR-2**_**, ANNOS BASIN â€" PRANAS, MILITARY SUMMIT**

Jane stood in the meeting room aboard the ship, looking across at the new addition to the elite cadre of soldiers. ONISAD Operatives stood off to her left, hands clasped behind their back, and a serious look on their face. They stood in stark contrast to the Spartan-IVs in both attire and mannerisms. Shepard could tell that Palmer used to be more heavily involved with the UNSC's Spartan branch; the former UNSC Marine was conversing with Rook and Wizard in a calm manner, talking about the UNSC Scientists they've worked alongside with in the past.

There was John in his black Spartan-II dress uniform; he was talking to Keyes about the latest generations of weapons which had just recently arrived. Melee Weapons with catalyst hard-light blades, SABR-A2 Rifles with Catalyst Module/Ammunition, Z-180D Close Combat

Rifle (Scattershot)/Asymmetric Engagement Mitigator and MA9L Individual Combat Weapon Systems were amongst the weapons cache.

Finally, Admiral Anderson, he stood two Shepard's left, cleanly shaven, freshly cleaned, and wearing his new dress blues. The Summit had just ended, and by the look of things, Anderson looked pissed. He and Admiral Hood had travelled to the diplomatic ship in order to negotiate things further.

"So how'd it go?" Jane asked. Everyone stopped their conversations and turned to listen.

"Lots of people asking for help. Hood and Victus managed to avert another war. " Anderson answered, placing both of his hands on the oak wood table. "Old feuds run deep."

Shepard frowned. This galaxy had a very frustrating group of politicians. But she was thankful that those in charge of the Turian and Krogan, were visionaries.

"The Dalatrass made things extremely difficult," Anderson continued, "she gave us one hell of an ultimatum."

"Such as?" Jane inquired.

A couple of people in the meeting room noticed the lack of formalities between the two, and quickly, an unsaid tension dispersed as they entered a more relaxed stance.

"If we want the krogan's help, we need to cure the genophage."

"I take it the Dalatrass went ape shit," Shepard said bluntly.

Anderson nodded. "She took a hard lined stance, but Urdnot Wrex, well, he didn't come to the table without another hand."

The Admiral projected a video footage that the krogan had given to him. The image was clear, but was narrow in vision. The sound of rustling was quite prevalent, but what Shepard saw, was undeniable.

"A salarian scientist, Maelon, was on Tuchanka. Working on a cure."

"I was there, his methods were barbaric," Shepard added.

"I know," Anderson said, "the Dalatrass sent in a team of STG to clean house. The female krogans who survived the experiments were taken prisoner, they are immune to the genophage. Wrex demands them to be returned."

"Rock and a hard place for the salarians."

"Indeed. But the Dalatrass has agreed to the terms. Here are the coordinates for the females. They're on Sur'Kesh. As a Council Spectre, you can oversee the exchange, Shepard."

"I'm on it."

"But the Coalition have to remain in orbit," Anderson frowned, "unless if something unexpected occurs."

That small statement earned murmurs of unease from the UNSC cohort, but no complaint was voiced.

"Once we have the krogans on board, that she help free up a few things," Anderson said. "I'll see you all later."

With that, Anderson left for his ship to return to the Citadel and coordinate resistance in Alliance Systems that are still under threat from Reaper forces.

Shepard turned to face the ONISAD team. From the shred of information Keyes and John had fed her, they were one of the longest standing network operatives. Superb in their ability to train resistance fighters, assassinate individuals via unconventional and conventional methods, and root out opposing cells. However, Jane noticed that one of them was a woman, and that her mannerisms had a gung-ho military edge to it. Whereas the other two, had the professionalism of bureaucracy, there attire was similar to John, but it lacked the chrome stripe and insignia.

"Arca," she said.

The man turned his luminous blue eyes on her.

"What's the news on resistance?" Shepard asked.

Arca gave Keyes a quick look, who gave a quick nod of authorisation. The Paramilitary Officer brought up the galaxy map, and outlined key systems.

"Intel from Prowlers says that the vast majority of Reaper forces are forming a Maginot line along the Attican Traverse," he said neutrally. "Systems Alliance Space is still mostly under Reaper control. They have their forces shipping genetic material back into their controlled regions."

"They're expanding their forces," John added.

"Yes Chief," Lotus said, "Outer and Inner Council Space are having their border's pressed on. Sangheili fleets are doing whatever they can, but they're being stretched thin. We can't risk having heavy casualties. Griffin and Prowlers are doing hit and run tactics whenever they can. Most of the Reaper casualties will be around the relays, so watch yourself."

Jane's brow furrowed. Even with the Coalition, there's still going to be a lot of casualties.

"It's still too early to enact Hammer-Down protocols," Keyes added, "still to many systems with survivors."

"But the moment those systems are wiped cleanâ€¦"

"They get Nova'd," the scientist finished.

"We've got people on the ground scouting out planets," Arca said.

"All Special Force teams are on deployment across every theatre of war, but without heavy support, there's not much they can do against a ship."

Jane paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. "Alright, meeting adjourned. Let's get to Sur'Kesh. EDI, plot a course for us."

"Of course, Shepard," the AI responded.

When the team dispersed, most of them headed down to the armoury, like Shepard. Each and every one of them was waiting to test the new toys that Navy and Army Special Weapons had sent them. Deciding on what to take with her to Sur'Kesh, she settled for a Sabre-H, an M87R-S SMG and a M11DEW sidearm.

The ground team she was going to take with her consisted of Garrus, Liara, Javik and Vega. The Prothean decided to stick with his own weapons, T'Soni picked the M87R-SMG, and was taught by Keyes how to use it effectively. Both Garrus and Vega took the MA9L ICWS, and their own preferred customised sniper rifle and shotgun, respectively.

Moving into the firing range, Shepard took the far firing station and levelled the Sabre. The rifle quickly assembled itself in her hands and pulsed a cool blue, signalling that it was ready to fire. She aimed down its hovering sights, and squeezed the trigger.

Bolts of blue energy lashed down the range and through the target dummies. A strong thick mist of ionised air always trailed in the wake of the weapon fire, and a thick cloud of a blue hue always surrounded the point of impact. Shepard knew that the weapon would be an extreme psychological deterrent on the enemy – if they had a conscience of course.

A few metres to her left, Arca and Lotus were testing the EMBR-240A2. They seemed impressed with its bullpup design and the integral sound annulment module. The rifle's compact design allowed the barrel to be extended, adding more magnetic coils, hence increasing accuracy and muzzle velocity. However, the two Operatives were testing the weapons without the silencers engaged. Bullets breaking the sound barrier at blistering speeds were creating a deafening crescendo, making Jane wish she had worn ear muffs.

She looked at their target down range, and it looked like a grotesque parody. The automatic fire from the Ember rifles absolutely shredded the target and its armour. Thankfully, Shepard could still hear Palmer's whistle of approval.

The newly inducted ONISAD Operative picked up an M770 Special Application Sniper Rifle, one of the DEW sniper rifles in the UNSC's armament, and attached a light annulment module to reduce its signature. She slapped in a fresh clip, and zeroed in on the targets. In a few quick moments, half a dozen targets had a smouldering stump where their head once was.

â€|

Within the armoury, John looked over the weapons he had at his disposal. Looking at the SABR-HA2 model in his hand, he noticed how they bore a remarkable resemblance to the Forerunners' Z-750 SASR.

With most of the cadre testing the weapons, the Spartan had decided to sit it out. He'd picked up many weapons and used them easily without prior training, so it was no big loss that he couldn't test them now.

Leaning on the bench, he pulled out the deployment roster on his tacpad. Hood had left with the Logistics Fleet. Fhajad was tagging along 22nd Fleet with Red Team. Gray Team was deployed behind enemy lines._ As always_, John thought.

Assigned with the _Normandy_ was UNSC Destroyer _Divinus_, commanded by Commander Miranda Keyes. The Chief wished there could be more ships assigned to the task force, but things were already stretching thin for the Coalition as is. The Arbiter did mention something about having _Shadow of Intent_ on standby.

â€|

Satisfied with weapon performance, Keyes led Fifth Element towards a locker of melee weapons. A small hiss came as he popped the seals, revealing three swords.

"I had these made for you," Keyes said, "they're to replace the ones you lost. In built catalyst modules. Biomass will disintegrate when touched."

Bryce received a Katana, and at the will through his implants, plasma spread along the blade.

"Donnie, I think this is the best present I've received in a long time," he thanked.

"Read the blade."

The Operative's eyes shifted down to the section near the hilt, and to his great joy, were the words, _We are brothers, to the end and beyond_, engraved in Chinese on one side, and Japanese on the other.

"You spoil him too much," Sarah said.

"I agree," Adrian added.

Palmer was given two lengthened ninjato (to suit her size) for dual wielding, while Adrian received a long blade, with a minor gradual curve at the last third of the blade, the hilt was also curved too. It was reminiscent of a cross between an oriental blade and an Arabic weapon.

"Thanks Keyes," Adrian said.

"Length can be adjusted, and they fold away neatly too," Keyes added.

Palmer raised an eyebrow and moved the blade to her thigh holsters, the moment she let go, seams appeared on the blade and split apart, reforming into a harmless cylinder with a hilt.

"Enjoy guys."

****XXxxXX****

****SUR'KESH â€" SALARIAN SPECIAL TASKS GROUP RESEARCH BASE.****

Shepard gazed out of the Alliance Kodiak's viewport, watching the beautiful mountainous green landscapes of Sur'Kesh stretch far out below the rays of the sun.

"This is the salarian homeworld we're headed to Wrex," Jane said, turning her attention on the clan leader. "They aren't used to seeing krogan here, so let's keep it simple."

Wrex starred at the towering human, who he once knew to be of average size.

"We land, get the females, and leave before anyone changes their mind," she finished.

"I still don't trust a word they say," he growled.

"Be friendly Wrex," Jane warned in that no-nonsense tone of hers, "we can't risk having another war right now. But by all means, if they start backtracking, use the angry krogan act when necessary."

"Who says anything about acting?"

"Justâ€¦ try to keep it verbal."

"These females are the best and probably last hope for my people," Wrex said.

"We'll bring them back, Wrex," Liara reassured, "don't worry."

"I appreciate that Liara," the Krogan said sincerely, "I wouldn't want anyone else along for the ride."

Garrus coughed, rather loudly and strained, too exaggerated to be real. Wrex turned to face the turian.

"I suppose I can make room for you too, Garrus," the clan leader said, before letting a low hearty chuckle.

"Figured you'd gone soft sitting on your throne, forgot how to hold a gun," Vakarian poked.

"He wouldn't be king then, would he?" Javik said, his low rolling voice filling the Kodiak.

Shepard was slightly annoyed that she couldn't take the Osprey with her; Cortez seemed to share the same sentiment too.

"Who's that?" Wrex asked.

Jane looked at Javik. "He's a Prothean," she answered, grabbing hold of the overhanging beam.

"Sometimes I'm not sure if the Normandy's a warship or a travelling freak show," Wrex said, expressing his view of the unique cadre. "But as long as he can hold a gunâ€¦ I think we'll be fine. Then again, look at you. Don't know what happened, but I'd think you'd give a

krogan a run for his money in melee."

"Thanksâ€¦ I guess."

From the cockpit, Cortez's voice came through. "Commander, I have the salarian base on sensors."

"Set her down," Shepard ordered.

Cortez weaved the shuttle through the tree covered cliff face, reminiscent of China's coastal regions. Rivers and waterfalls streamed through the valleys, surrounding the salarian base, and giving it an advantageous position. The Kodiak hovered over the landing pad, billowing up gusts of air.

"Commander, salarian ground control says we don't have clearance to land," Cortez said worriedly as Shepard entered the cockpit.

"Tell them the dalatrass authorised this herself."

"I knew they'd never keep their word!" Wrex growled. He walked up to the doors and opened the hatch. "Let's see them try to stop a krogan airdrop."

"Wrex!" Jane growled.

The Krogan launched him through the air with a growl, and landed with a loud thud.

"We have an unauthorised landing," a salarian STG officer said.

"And who authorised you to hold my race hostage?" Wrex growled. With a swift movement of his arms, he encased himself in a mist of biotics, and hurled the two guards into the walls. The krogan didn't kill them, but he did knock them a bit.

STG operatives quickly took up defensive perimeters. Snipers activated their laser pointers and trained them onto the krogan, as a warning gesture. Shepard quickly jumped onto the ground, using her biotics to dampen the fall.

"Halt!" a salarian barked.

"Hold your fire!" another salarian ordered. Unlike the rest of his colleagues who were wearing white armour, his was jet black, signifying superior rank. His tone was worried and stressed. Considerable since the following events could quite very well spark another war with the krogans. "Commander Shepard, restrain your colleague. We only found out about this transfer a few moments ago."

"I'd like to avoid a diplomatic incident," Jane said in agreement.

"As would we," the salarian said, relieved.

"But you have something valuable to Wrex."

"Something worth dying for," the Krogan added.

"This matter can be resolved," the salarian said, his stress levels breaking through again, "but I must insist he remain under guard."

Wrex grunted and growled.

"I can handle this Wrex," Shepard said firmly.

"Anything goes wrong and all bets are off!"

Cortez landed the Kodiak onto the landing pad, while a squad of salarians stood close guard. The salarian officer led Shepard and her team towards the wing's foyer. She took the time to admire the dÃ©cor. For a species with an extremely high rate of emotional processing, they certainly had good taste.

"I'm Padok Wiks," the salarian officer said, "and I appreciate your understanding, Commander. With war on everyone's mind, our people are on edge."

An ominous roar drew Jane's attention, to an overhanging cell being transported along the rails. It was a yahg, a violent species with a bitter past with humanity. She could feel her skin crawl as she watched the being smash against the containment barriers.

The tips of Liara's tentacles flushed deep lavender, showing the increasing stress levels in her body.

"Careful!" a salarian yelled, "watch the containment barriers."

"I'd hope to never see one of those again," the asari said with mixed emotion.

"As you can see, this base contains sensitive information," Wiks supplied.

That explains everything, Jane thought, she had an intuitive mind, being able to draw conclusions like these were not much of a stretch for her. _No wonder they don't want the UNSC down hereâ€¦ salarians might've learned of the Coalition's existence because of the yahg, definitely explains the lack of reaction from the salarians._

"What kind of work goes on here?" Jane asked, facing Wiks.

"Evolutionary trials," Padoks listed. "Morphological simulation. Exogenetic assessment."

"Nothing is ever simple with salarians is it?"

"Science has always been our best defence. The research we do here has kept Sur'Kesh safe for millennia."

"Does that include studying lost krogan?" Jane asked in a patronising manner.

"The females were in poor health when we found them on Tuchanka," Padoks explained. "they were brought here to stabilise their condition."

"This whole planet smells wrong," Wrex said, being led away by a squad of salarian soldiers.

"I'd like to see them," Shepard said.

"Of course, I'll need to clear you for the lower levels," Padoks complied, "give me a few minutes and meet me at the elevator."

The salarian left for a console on the far side of the balcony, allowing Jane to go check up on Wrex.

"This is where all you salarians come from, huh?" he questioned a guard, "No wonder you're so soft. Too busy writing poetry about waterfalls." He turned to Shepard's team. "Shepard, I don't like this. I should be the one going in."

"How about you stay here and we only fight one war at a time?" Jane scolded.

"That was just good old-fashioned krogan hot air," Wrex said jovially, "if it'd been real, they'd be dead."

"So who tipped you off about this place?" Jane asked.

"Sorry Shepard, but they're listening to every word we say," he faced the Salarian guards. "I prefer my salarian liver served raw!"

The guards squinted their eyes and furrowed their brows, clearly expressing their frustration.

"He is correct," Javik added, "it was a delicacy in our cycle."

"Glad we agree," Wrex said, he turned his head too look at Liara directly. "Besides, you'd think this is the kind of thing the Shadow Broker would know about. Too bad I don't know him or her."

Liara shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her armour plates clashing as she did so. "I'm sure the broker was very busy," the Asari said.

Shepard ignored the comment. "Back on the Normandy, you said Reapers were sighted on Tuchanka."

"Clans Jorgal and Ravanor sighted a few landing parties," Wrex explained. "The Reapers are up to something. Tuchanka may be a pile of radioactive rubble, but it's our pile, and we'll fight to the last krogan to keep it that way."

"And that's exactly what it will take," Javik said cryptically.

"We're krogan. We're ready," Wrex said proudly.

"You can never be prepared for what's coming," Javik said cynically.

"Coalition sweeps the Reapers aside, and you're still pessimistic," Wrex wondered out aloud, "must've been a helluva fight."

"Alright, I better go, be back soon."

Walking over to Wiks, Jane spotted Kirrahe, and decided to say hello. He had helped her in the fight against Saren on Virmire, and a few minutes of kind words was something she could do with.

"Commander Shepard, your taller than I remembered," the salarian greeted warmly. "It's Major Kirrahe, I heard you were coming."

"Good to see you again," Jane beamed, shaking the Salarian's hand, "sounds like you've been promoted."

"Yes, due in no small part to our mission on Virmire, 'hold the line'. You saved my men that day."

"Good to see a friendly face Major," Garrus smiled, well, whatever counted as a smile for a turian anyway.

"Garrus Vakarian, always a pleasure," Kirrahe smiled. "And same to you Doctor T'soni."

"Major," Liara gave a curt nod.

"It seems the Reapers have a way of bringing us together," Kirrahe said cheerfully, leaning against the console.

"So how'd you get posted here Major?"

"I led the team on Tuchanka that found the females. Nasty business. Maleon may have meant well, but his operation was crude," Kirrahe frowned. He always seemed the more human one out of the salarians. "Test subjects unaccounted for, the females easily escaped his lab."

"What do you think about bringing the female krogan here?"

"Our scientists say it's important to preserve the females. 'Evolutionary paradigms,'" he said, creating quotation gestures in the air. "I saw, when people know you're hiding something valuable, they'll want to steal it. Either way I have my orders. They'll be your problem soon enough."

"I guess were both still feeling the effects of Virmire," Jane shrugged.

After a few more minutes of light conversation, and hastily introducing Javik, to which Kirrahe had initially believed to be an intricate cosmetic surgery for psychological warfare against the Reapers, the team bid the Major adieu, before heading to Wiks.

"And Commander, regardless of what the diplomats say," Kirrahe added, "you have my support in retaking Earth."

"You do that?" Jane asked, both surprised and thankful.

"Consider it a favour," the Major smiled, "it would be an honour to fight alongside you again. Good day."

Even through the severity of the galaxy's current situation, the salarians were still cracking jokes, most of which were cynical and

satirical, but funny nonetheless. However, there were concerns about security leaks within the base, that were being voiced.

"We've got unknown aircraft skirting our air defences," a salarian soldier said to Wiks.

"Must be testing us, I don't like it, not with everything going on. Have our people on standby."

"Yes sir," the soldier complied, before running off to tend to his assigned tasks.

"You have clearance to see the females, Commander," Padoks said, placing down the holopad. "I hope we can resolve this matter without re-enacting the krogan rebellions."

"So what do you think about handing over the krogan?" Jane asked, testing the morality of the salarian.

"I differ from most of my colleagues;" he said animatedly, "curing the genophage will bring closure to this issue. In the future, the krogan may yet play some role we can't even imagine. We should let the revolutionary process decide who lives and dies. Not galactic politics."

"Thanks for your time."

"Of course," Wiks said, crossing his arms, "proceed into the elevator when you're ready."

Walking up to the doors, a blue light shot out and scanned the Spectre.

"Now take this elevator down and someone willâ€¦"

An alarm interrupted Padoks's instructions. "Alert! Threat condition two has been declared. Scramble readiness teams."

"What's happening?" Jane asked. The based exploded in a fury of motions as STG Operatives and Salarian soldiers scrambled to their stations. Wiks activated his Omni-tool to get readout of what was happening.

"Sensors have picked up activity on the perimeter," he gestured towards the elevator, "hurry Commander, someone will meet you below."

Entering the elevator, Shepard could feel the engines whine as the platform descended into the depths of the Research Base. There was unease in the air, and multiple factors played a part in it. She wished the other Spartans were here, John in particular. But her friend couldn't come, unless they wanted to risk some diplomatic turmoil.

The Dalatrass is one fucking bitch, Jane thought. _Never makes anything easy_.

As the elevator doors parted open, Shepard and her team stepped into the dim blue lights of the underground chamber. It was a stark contrast to the sunshine, open air and running waters that lay above.

Over the intercom, a controller relayed contingency protocols to be carried out. Salarian scientists were running from console to console, checking the integrity of systems.

Jane's lips curled into a small smile when she saw who was waiting for them. He had red pigmented skin, white lab coat with a central red strip, and a shortened horn that didn't look like a birth defect.

"Shepard! Excellent timing. Good to have you here," Professor Mordin Solus greeted.

"Mordin?" Jane beamed.

"Eyesight still sharp. Surprise understandable. Hadn't expected to return to work. More or less surprised about your size."

"So I've been told," Jane said, rubbing the back of her neck.

"He has a peculiar way of speaking," Javik complimented.

"A Prothean? Excellent," Mordin said, as if he was commenting on the weather.

"You're back with STG?" Garrus asked.

"Special consultant," Solus explained, "had to be me, someone else might have gotten it wrong."

He quickly looked around, before dropping his voice into a low register and whispered, "Helped female krogan. Fed information to Clan Urdnot. Encouraged political pressure to free females."

"You must be Wrex's inside source," Jane concluded

"Mind still sharp, excellent. Yes. Can explain later. Security warning not normal. Need to get off world for sake of krogan."

The scientist began leading them towards the containment chambers. "Females had weakened immune system. Side effect of Maelon's cure."

Mordin gestured to the body bags. "These," he breathed in sharply, "didn't survive."

"Well what about Maelon's research? I thought we saved it," Shepard said.

"Indeed," Solus confirmed, "data saved, but not complete. Lacks crucial details to reconstruct cure, but still useful from synthesising tissueâ€¦ couldn't save them."

"I'm sure you did everything you could, Mordin."

"Arrived too late. Cannot delay now," Mordin's voice picked up in urgency, "one survivor. Immune to genophage. Can synthesise tissue from her tissue."

"She's still here?" Jane asked as Mordin led her down a flight of steps

"Yes, last hope for krogan. If she dies, genophage cureâ€¦|
problematic."

Mordin lead the group to a containment cell, where a krogan female was kept stable in a pod.

"Please be careful, krogan slow to trust."

"I'm Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy," Jane said softly.

"Are you here to kill me?" she asked. Her voice was old, and her tone was weary, as if all the fight in her was gone.

"Goddess," Liara gasped, reading the bioscans from her Omni-tool, "what she's been through."

"Urdnot Wrex and I are here to take you home," Shepard answered.

"Why? What am I to you?"

"Have the salarian's been mistreating you?"

"Those were my sisters you saw back there. They died in a lot of pain."

"Did the best we could," Mordin said, bowing his head out of respect.

"And now I know I'm the only one left. That makes me dangerous to a lot of people," the Krogan Female said. "What about you Commander Shepard? Why are you here?"

"You're the future of the krogan race. I'm fighting for that," Shepard answered.

Alarms began to chatter, and sirens began to wail.

"The I hope you brought an army," the Krogan Female said, understanding the gravity of the alarms.

"Alert, unidentified vessels have breached the perimeter," the controller said. Immediately, the salarians began enacting contingency protocols. They moved their research data to offsite locations, while preparing to wipe current copies.

Shepard overheard one of the salarians say that their communications had been severed.

"What's happening?"

"We have multiple ships, inbound!"

Shepard activated the helmet, the pieces extended from her armour and reassembled around her head, obscuring her face. Some of the salarian's eyes widened in surprised as they witnessed the technological achievement.

Jane quickly activated the distress beacon, before unslinging her

Sabre-H, it was time to get to work.

****XXxxxXX****

****ABOARD SSV **_**NORMANDY-**_**SR2, SUR'KESH, LOW ORBIT****

"Sure you want to go, Keyes?" Arca asked.

The scientist looked at him, and nodded.

"Alright, but I'm taking point then."

"Fine by me."

Keyes' MJOLNIR Armour snapped into place as he fitted them onto his hydrostatic gel/Positronic suit. John on the other hand, just simply _walked _into his armour. The plates split open, allowing him to enter, and resealed again, encasing him in the most powerful UNSC model to date. Nanite/Positronic tendrils linked with his bodysuit, before interfacing with his neural pathways and muscle structure.

ONISAD, not being able to afford the luxury of fully autonomous armour, the Operatives were forced to put each piece of their Tactical Stealth Suit on manually. If Palmer felt uncomfortable about wearing armour that was more revealing, as in figure hugging, then she didn't show it. She however did express her distaste in the inferior defensive capabilities to the MJOLNIR.

Satisfied that everyone's gear was in full working order. John opened the hangar doors, the containment barriers kicked in to prevent a decompression.

"Ah, HALO jump," Lotus muttered, "what joy."

Joker had positioned the _Normandy_ above the salarian base. Shepard's mayday call had been relayed to Commander Miranda Keyes, who was also moved _Divinus _into a geosynchronous orbit.

"Chief?" it was Cortana, her voice came through crystal clear over the COMs.

"Go ahead."

"Cerberus forces are attacking the base, how they made it onto the Sur'Kesh is beyond me. Your best bet is to attack from the south and east, and secure an LZ for Shepard."

"Try and hold off bombardment," John said, not wanting to create undue concerns.

"Copy Chief. I'll keep an eye out."

With the sun in the corner of their eyes, John led the group of Spartans out of the ship and into a high altitude free fall. The Spartan could see a platoon of ODSTs drop in via pod insertion, and behind them, followed the Airborne. But he also spotted another group performing a HALO jump; it was Third Element, another ONISAD team, led by Sandman.

Reaching the lower atmospheres, John could hear the air howling past. And in a silent agreement, the jumpers activated their thruster packs, slowing their descent.

"This is Hunter Three," said a middle aged, male voice, evidently an ODS platoons, "we're on the ground."

John's enhanced vision allowed him to see squads of Helljumpers deployed in a double pincer formation, putting pressure on Cerberus, while allowing Airborne to join the battlefield safely.

Divinus wasn't a frigate, hence it's on board compliments were more for defending the ship, rather than participate in incursions. But exceptions had to be made, probably why Lasky and another General assigned a company of Airborne to the ship.

The group touched down softly on a rocky outcrop, brushing past a few trees on the way in. The last of the UNSC forces landed groundside on the surrounding cliff edges, John began to issue orders.

"Hunt and kill all Cerberus forces, create a perimeter and keep them in."

Acknowledgement lights from unit COs winked on John's HUD. Ospreys flew in and dropped their chocks of Talons and light vehicles. Helljumpers retrieved Grendel and Missile Launchers from their body, preparing to shoot down any Cerberus shuttle.

"Chief, I've detected no Cerberus forces outside of the perimeter," Cortana supplied, "main bulk of enemy forces are at the southern end."

"Copy," John then switched to other channels, "begin the advance."

ODSTs and Airborne crashed through the forest, combing out Cerberus snipers and mortar teams, while Talons flew overhead as sniper support.

"Sierra One-one-seven," the COMs crackled, "this is Third element, Sandman. We're at the northern end of the base."

"Copy, set up sniper positions, and coordinate the perimeter," the Chief said, "I'm going in."

"Acknowledged, good hunting, out."

John gestured to Arca and said, "Move in from the east, I'll take Keyes, Rook and Wizard in from the south."

"You got it Chief."

The Spartan then flicked his COMs to encrypted channel and contacted Shepard.

"Jane?" he called over the private COM. He could hear Shepard's heavy panting, and the sound of alarms.

"I'm here," she gasped, "we've got the Krogan Female, almost at the top."

"I'm groundside with a few teams, we're coming in."

"Got it."

John frowned slightly when the COM switched off. There was something wrong. He knew the Krogan Female would be the target, and would've expected a massive mayday call from Shepard, but she didn't send one. Just a warning message. He expected that the Illusive Man would've sent in the people that killed Crimson Two. But now was not the time for those thoughts. If those guys weren't here, they'd probably have been shot down by the Claymores, or they never went to Sur'Kesh at all.

Sprinting to the edge of the cliff, the Spartan dug his heels into the rock, and flung himself across the water before using his thruster pack to get him the rest of the way. Rook, Wizard and Keyes followed suit, and pretty soon, they reached the Salarian base.

Quickly, Cerberus troops opened fire on them, but the Spartans were faster. They were already behind cover before Cerberus had pulled the trigger. Rook and Wizard leaned out of cover quickly and fired successive bursts. The unmodified hard light rounds smashed through the flimsy armour, before reaching the flesh and cooking it.

"Target down," Wizard said.

"Move up!" John barked.

He vaulted over the cover, knocking a console onto the burnt floor, and raised his Sabre. At the quick squeeze of the trigger, the Chief turned a counter top into molten metal, depriving the enemy sniper of cover. Keyes quickly finished her off with a shot to the head, before moving on.

â€|

****A FEW FLOORS ABOVE GROUND****

With sword in hand, and sidearm in the other, Shepard channelled her biotic abilities through the blade and creating devastating shockwaves and powerful detonations which hurled everything over the edge. Cerberus soldiers screamed in fear as they were displaced by Liara's singularity, allowing her teammates to finish them off quickly

Jane sprinted around the corner, and narrowly dodged a phantom's attack. But since Shepard was the faster one, she quickly pirouetted in the air, and slammed her boot into the phantom's face, breaking the visor and smashing the skull. The Cerberus Operative was already dead by the time she hit the floor.

A group of guardians appeared at the end of the balcony, covering a few engineers placing down turrets. With her team still busy with centurions and nemesis. Shepard decided to make herself a distraction to draw Cerberus off her team.

She closed the distance between her and her opponent quickly, propelling herself in a stream of blue light. The resulting shockwave

from her attack knocked a couple of guardians off balanced. Adrenaline began to course through Shepard's veins, her world slowed to a crawl, making the slits in the shields easy targets.

In a few short seconds, heads bucked back as bullets bore straight through them, throwing brain and blood matter onto the shattered tiles. Jane sprinted towards the engineers, and before they could pull out their pistols, her blade had already removed their heads, leaving a burning stump behind. A swift curb stomp from her boots ensured that the turrets would never work again.

"Shepard," it was Mordin, "need you to clear us through checkpoint, taking heavy fire."

"Got it!"

Jane noticed that her team was barely keeping up. It was nice to go run wild, and with Spartan enhancements, well that just made things easier. Shepard slammed her fist onto the security console, allowing the Female Krogan's cell to continue on moving.

"All units, be advised, tagging objective. Defend it," Cortana said over the COMs.

Shepard's HUD was updated with a marker that was tagged on the Female Krogan and Mordin's containment cell. The scientist must be going through all kind of stresses, having to worry about the health and safety of the Krogan while hacking through security.

"Everybody, target snippers and centurions, I'll handle the rest," she said over TEAMCOM.

"Got it, Lola," Vega answered.

The team moved along another balcony, however there was a Cerberus ambush waiting for them. At least half a dozen sniper rounds impacted along Jane's shields, but they held steady. The Spectre took cover behind a plant box, sheathed her sword and shouldered her Sabre. With cloak engaged, she raised herself from cover, and fired. The opposing balcony was ripped and melted, killing the ambushers quickly.

Another two phantoms appeared down the hallway, Shepard gestured her team to engage the Cerberus troops, while she handled the ninja's on speed.

Using her biotics, Shepard hurled a bench down the hall, but the phantoms were faster. They summersaulted over the large missile, and landed gracefully on the ground, before advancing on Shepard, palm blasters firing.

The accurate bolts splashed across her chest, and drained the shields marginally. With a roar, Jane unleashed a powerful shockwave down the hall. The forefront of such force, ripped the lightings from the ceilings, tore up tiles and dented the walls. There was no way the phantoms could dodge that, and so, they were consumed by a powerful wave of blue light.

Shepard breathed heavily as she slung her rifle onto her back, and went back to her earlier configuration of sword in right hand and

pistol in left.

"Cerberus got here too fast, they must've been tipped off," Garrus commented.

"Every war has its traitors."

Jane led her team through the water soaked passage ways. The fires had dampened but they were still burning.

"You're almost at the top," Wrex said over the COM, "don't let that female die!"

"Jesus Wrex," Shepard snapped, "you need to know how hard it is not to get a bullet in your arse."

The team entered a wildlife chamber, where they got to see the timely demise of a Cerberus trooper, at the hands of a varren. Vega quickly shot the creature, creating a mouldering hole in its head before it could become a problem.

"Down boy," he muttered.

"How's the female," Shepard asked Mordin over the COM.

"Stabilising," the scientist answered, "containment barriers still holding, she will live."

"We've got lives ones in here!" Jane heard a centurion barked.

Cerberus troops were coming in from three directions, top, left and right.

"We'll take the high ground, once they're on me, haul ass to the stairs," Shepard barked.

Before anyone could protest, Jane propelled herself in a stream of biotic light, and slammed into a centurion. She could feel his body disintegrate under the impact, while his comrades were sent flying into the walls, rupturing their internal organs before they had even hit the floor. The Spectre spun on her heels and fired her pistol, slaying Cerberus troopers easily, while her blade burned through the guardian shields.

Reaching back to the balconies again, Jane spotted another ambush at the security checkpoint.

"Take them out!" She ordered, "Don't let them get to the female!"

"Got it," Garrus complied.

But before anyone could pull the trigger, the Cerberus troops dropped dead.

"You guys owe me five credits," Jane heard Palmer say over the COMs. "I've got eyes on Shepard and HVI, keeping them covered."

"Copy that," John's voice sounded over the channels, "all units, sitrep."

"Super Three-two here, doing a flyby, no threats spotted, over."

"Cortana here, no external threats detected."

"Third Element here, our end is clear."

"Fifth Element here, wrapping up with a few stragglers."

"Shepard here, HVI is secure and safe, for now. Moving to extraction point."

"Solid copy," the Chief said, "we'll meet you there."

Finally, reaching back where they started, Jane cleared the final security checkpoint, allowing the containment cell to be opened.

"Alert, incoming threats! Unknown source!" Cortana cried.

"Shepard, heads up!" Wrex warned, he was in Cortez's Kodiak, and the two were acting as another eye in the sky. "You've got multiple hostiles in bound."

John quickly gestured for Keyes, Rook and Wizard to take up firing positions, and have their Achilles pack at the ready. Two Atlas Mechs dropped out of the sky, and landed on the landing pad with a loud screech.

They raised their arms, and on it, were menacing rotary cannons. The massive guns spooled up and unleashed a storm of explosive bullets. Shepard staggered back as a round caught her squarely in the chest, causing her shields to fail as fire washed over her.

"Jane!" Liara cried.

The Chief, having access to Shepard's vitals, knew that she was unharmed, and before he could dive to save her. Jane was already hurling herself forward in a stream of blue light, and slammed head on into the first Atlas. The force from her charge combined with arms fire, drained the mech's shields considerably, allowing Jane to deliver the killing blow. The pilot barely managed to register his fate as Shepard drove her blade into the cockpit, and into his head.

The last Atlas attempted to turn its gun onto the Krogan Female, but John was already ahead of the pilot. He quickly jumped in front of Mordin and the Female, and threw down a bubble shield. Heavy calibre rounds exploded on the protective barrier, allowing Rook to quickly clamber onto the mechs rear, and slam a live grenade into its exhaust.

He quickly back flipped off the vehicle, and threw himself behind cover as the grenade detonated, showering everyone with burning debris.

"HVI is secured," Jane breathed, "let's wrap this

up."

XXxxXX

"_M770 Special Application Sniper Rifleâ€| more suited to taking out soft targets."

>_**-Master Gunnery Sergeant James Stacker**_

XXxxXX

A/N: The galaxy is one big placeâ€| and I mean really big place. If you haven't noticed it now, I'm trying to invoke that size.

System's Alliance expanded further than the UNSC did, so it is very likely that the Alliance has a numerically larger fleet. UNSC colonised **part**** of the Orion arm.**

Well, please review.

36. Tuchanka

A/N: Gratuitous violence continuesâ€| with plot of course. So technically it's not gratuitous violence, but EXTREME BADASSERY

Point taken everyone. Fine. I shall not exercise artistic license in order to give the Alliance a smidgen of chance. (That being said I wanted to write about a massive slaughter)â€| and thanks to TarakX who pointed out naval numbers, (can't believe I forgot that).

And thanks to The Critical One. Council Bastard bells tolls very loudlyâ€|

So recent poll reports:

I've got requests that this story be driven by pure gratuitous violence (with logical and intricate plot of course), and some people hoping for a bit more sentimentâ€| and flirtingâ€|.

Yeah, I should tell you right now that I go to an All Boys school, it's been that way since year 3, and my **_experience**_** with the opposite gender has been minimal. But challenge accepted, I will look into the ways of flirting, and assimilate.**

So in this scenario, I will do what I always doâ€| compromise and cater to all.

XXxxXX

"_Someone leaked the investigation. Now half the UNSC believes that the Spartan-Twos are children."

>_**-Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge (Adrian James Chen)**_

"_Then what do you propose we do? The Fours thinks she's a monster, and half of HighCom wants her head on a platter."

>_**-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_There's not much we can do right now, but hope Hood can pull a miracle."

>_**-Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge**_

XXxxXX

IN SLSIPSPACE, ABOARD SSV **_NORMANDY SR-2**_**, EN ROUTE TO TUCHANKA**

Although they had just met a few hours ago, Keyes was having a great time working with Solus. The two were in _Normandy's_ medical bay, working on the genophage cure. Essingdon had studied a bit about krogan physiology in the past, and was thankful that they weren't as strong as the Brutes or Elites. That being said, he was also glad that the Covenant species didn't have redundancy systems. But rage seemed to be a common thing with the krogan and the Brutes.

"Keyes, notice uncomfortable mannerisms at mention of yahg, would like to ask why?" Mordin asked.

The UNSC scientist looked at Solus, placing his coffee onto the table. "Coalition-Coveneant war?"

"Ah yes, interplanetary conflict, heard little. Request no more," he breathed in, "if possible."

"Yahg's are violent. They followed the Covenant blindly."

"Yes, did read reports about interrogation. Subjects were believed to be unstable. Further investigations revealed hatred for humans. Odd since no official contact between two species."

"No official contact you knew of," Keyes said.

"Indeed."

A small alarm bleeped from the containment chamber module in which a few samples were being incubated.

"Tissue sample finished synthesising, must file control subject," the Salarian said.

He found Mordin's speech patterns to be _adorable_, planiloquent, academic and articulate. "I think Wrex, is a good control."

"Excellent, will go now and collect sample."

Essingdon furrowed his brows and loosened his tie. "Krogan have tough skinâ€|" he said uncomfortably, "I don't think that, cutting _there_ will be wise."

"Has to be there, someplace else and the results can be wrong."

Keyes sighed, as if he could sense a bad joke about to be cracked. "EDI, could you get Wrex in here please?"

"Of course Doctor," the AI said. Her voice returned over the intercom

a few seconds later, "Urdnot Wrex is busy at the moment, he says he will come to the medical bay when he is available."

"Thanks EDI."

"Maybe after this, can discuss details about other scientific exploration," Mordin said.

"Or we could just go to the beach."

"And test seashells, excellent."

Essingdon gave a soft chuckle. As Mordin turned to tend to his samples, Keyes decided to talk to the Krogan Female; it was a unanimous decision to call her Eve. Eve rested on one of the beds, hugging her legs close to her chest.

"You're taller than most humans," she said, "and tall humans are usually lanky. You are not."

"Why does that intrigue you?" Keyes asked, sitting on the adjacent bed.

"Something of a distraction."

"I see."

As the two continued talking, Eve learned of the old feud between humanity and the yahg, and their ascension to the stars without Mass Effect technology. Keyes learned of krogan history, and how Tuchanka used to be a beautiful paradise. He learned of the vast cultural difference between males and females.

"Thanks for the talk," Keyes said kindly.

"And thank you for coming," Eve said.

Seconds later, Liara entered the medbay, and beamed a quick smile to Keyes. "Shepard and Palmer are sparring in the Gym."

â€|

****GYM****

Shepard ducked as Palmer's fist swung over her head, and swept low with her legs. Sarah quickly leapt into the air and vaulted over the Spectre, avoiding the attack completely. Jane spun on her axis and delivered a flying kick. The Spartan-IV swept the kick aside before stepping back.

Sweat beaded down their foreheads, and soaked their fatigues. The two circled around each other like predators, waiting for an opening. A quiet silence filled the gym as crew members stopped to watch the match.

Palmer dug her heels into the mat and launched herself forward. Shepard gritted her teeth as she felt the Spartan crash into her and slammed her onto the floor. Jane wheezed and grabbed Sarah by the collar. Using all her might, she hurled Palmer across the mat.

The two got up, closed the distance again, and began throwing strikes. Most were parried and swatted aside, but few found their marks. Shepard executed a backflip kick, the sheer force of her momentum would've shattered a normal human's face, but Palmer was no normal human. She quickly sidestepped, rendering Shepard's attack a clean miss.

Remembering one of John's moves, Shepard decided to implement it. She threw her left fist, purposely overcommitting to the move. And just as she expected, Palmer grabbed onto her wrist and elbow in an attempt to lock her. Jane quickly stepped forward, before twisting around and swinging her right elbow at Sarah's temple. However, the Spartan was just as fast, and narrowly avoided the strike.

Capitalising on the split-second advantage, Shepard quickly retracted her left arm from Palmer's grip and delivered a powerful sidekick to the Spartan's stomach. Sarah was sent reeling end over end, but she was by no means down. She quickly gazed at Arca, standing behind the barriers, and gestured some sort of advice to her.

Palmer raised both her fists, she could feel her lungs burn, and the bottom of chest ache, but she could shrug it off. Launching herself at Shepard again, the Alliance Officer prepared to accept the brunt of the attack again, but Sarah fainted right, rotated, and performed a perfect back handspring.

Shepard was caught off guard by the move, and before she could turn to face, Palmer had struck two powerful punches to Jane's stomach. Shepard stumbled back, but quickly recovered. She began to shift her weight back and forth like a dance move. And quickly, without warning, she dove low and spun a high kick, which caught Palmer's shoulder.

The two entered several bouts of parrying, until finally, both of them caught each other in a lock. Draw both of them thought.

"It's a tie," Lotus said.

Shepard and Palmer sagged, they were drained.

"I don't care, just gimme a drink," Sarah gasped.

Arca raised an eyebrow, like a patronising father.

"May I have some water, please?" Palmer corrected herself.

"Why of course," Arca said with mock happiness. He quickly grabbed a plastic bottle and tossed it to her. Palmer caught the object with one hand, and quickly opened it, downing the contents.

"Scooch," Lotus said, "we've got an old score to settle."

The two Commanders looked at each other, and then looked back at Fifth Element.

"He challenged the Chief at lunch," Arca sighed. He sounded like he didn't want to go through with it.

"You guys are idiots," Sarah said, shaking her head. She climbed over

the barrier, and grabbed a towel. Wiping away the sweat, she sat down on the bench.

Arca quickly tossed her a can of deodorant.

"What?" Sarah cried, "It's just body odour."

"And that's odourless," Arca said, pointing towards the can.

"Palmer, we both smell," Shepard agreed. "But at least not as bad as these guys when they get their asses handed to them."

"Ouch," Lotus said.

Having anticipated the match, the two Operatives were already in workout fatigues. Black t-shirt, black pants, and black boots. Arca gestured to Rook and Wizard to join them.

"How many is the Chief going to fight?" Keyes asked, pocketing his AR glasses.

The scientist had just recently arrived, and like Liara who was with him, he was still in his labcoat.

Shepard took a swill from her bottle. "Four."

"Four, fours against a Two," Essingdon wondered aloud, "sounds very imbalanced."

The three women murmured in agreement.

"And by imbalanced, the Fours are screwed," he said.

"Hey!" Lotus and Wizard yelled.

"Aren't you going to join them?" Palmer asked Keyes.

The scientist glanced at Liara, and then looked back at Sarah. "No," he answered, "a few people don't want me hurt."

"Speak for yourself!" Lotus yelled.

The Chief entered the ring, wearing similar attire. The defining trait in all of the men was that their eyes glowed a luminous blue. They quickly bowed to each other, and the match began.

Palmer watched as Arca, Rook and Wizard advanced on the Spartan-II, creating a wall of fists, effectively covering each other, while suppressing the Chief. But John was physically superior in terms of strength and speed. He quickly doubled back, before vaulting over the three, and sprinted straight towards Lotus.

The Operative barely kept up with the flurry of punches, so he sidestepped and aimed a kick at the Chief's side. Catching Lotus' leg at his waist, John threw the Operative at Wizard, who was closing in fast.

Two down, he thought.

Arca and Rook moved in from both sides. Their number was their disadvantage. John quickly overwhelmed Rook and threw Lieutenant out of the ring, rendering him out. The Spartan-II turned shifted to Arca, and used his very own moves against him, long sweeping kicks, followed up by rapid twisting punches.

The Operative staggered under a blow to the chest, and just when John was about to defeat him, Lotus latched onto the Spartan-II's back.

"I got him! Hit him now!"

Arca quickly scrambled to his feet, and with all his might, punched John across the temple. The Chief staggered as his head snapped violently to the right, but he stabled himself, and gave a small grin. Kicking the Paramilitary Officer in the stomach, Arca was sent sliding across the mat and out of the ring.

"Oh shit," Lotus muttered.

John quickly locked his arm into place, curled forward, and launched himself into the air. Palmer winced inwardly as she saw Lotus used as a cushion for the massive Spartan's dive.

"Ahhh, that hurt," he wheezed.

The Chief spun around to face Wizard, and raised his fists.

"I stand alone," he sighed.

"And you will die alone," John said.

"That escalated quickly!" Wizard said, raising his eyebrows.

Not waiting for the Chief to make a move, the former ODST closed the gap and threw rapid stun punches. He knew that grappling with the stronger Spartan was a bad idea, and that his best chances of survival were to fight up close.

John held his ground firmly, parrying the Spartan-IV's moves, when finally he grabbed his younger opponent's fists, and swept his legs out from under him. Wizard landed with a thud, and quickly yielded.

Palmer and Shepard quickly entered the ring to make sure that there weren't any serious injuries. Everyone seemed to be okay.

"You know, we haven't given you a callsign yet," Lotus wheezed to Sarah.

"Air knocked out of you, and worrying about me not having a callsign," Palmer sighed.

"We've got our priorities right," Arca commented.

"Sure you do."

"How about Shirley?" Lotus suggested.

"No," Sarah hard lined.

"How about Athena?" Arca suggested.

Figuring that there could be cruder names assigned to her, Sarah accepted. "Deal."

"Commander," it was Joker, "we're at Tuchanka."

****XXxxXX****

****TUCHANKA, HIGH ORBIT****

Group-1/A7, led UNSC Reach-class Cruiser Adamant, had been assigned by Hood to aid the Normandy in this sector. Ten frigates, five destroyers and of course, one Cruiser, the Group had been assigned to provide support for this task.

From her seat inside the Albatross Freighter, Shepard watched as the Group deployed their vehicles and moved to engage the minor Reaper fleet. As always, the Destroyers took the charge. Their ion cannons spewing lances of cobalt energy into the Reapers. The Lead Sovereign class ship's hull boiled away under the savage barrage. Limbs were torn off and blobs of molten metal drifted away from the stricken ship.

Adamant, sailed forward, plumes of smoke rocketed from the missile pods. The Archer salvos detonated along the Reaper's Kinetic Barriers, and ignited their thermite charges. Streams of molten metal dripped onto the armour, they were travelling slow enough to not activate the shields. Slowly but surely, the Reapers' hull began to give away to the stress, leaving their superstructures vulnerable. One by one, the Reapers tore themselves apart.

UNSC Destroyer White Dagger, flanked the reformation via slispace jump, and unleashed a salvo of plasma missiles at point blank range. The Reaper in front of White Dagger shuddered as its shields winked off, and armour boiling away. With its superstructure exposed, the Destroyer gutted the Reaper vessel stem to stern, before ploughing straight through.

Satisfied that all Reaper naval forces had been dealt with, the UNSC Battlegroup began to clean up.

Jane had received a briefing from Admiral Anderson, Tuchanka was a mess. Reaper forces encroaching on the Shroud, were making things difficult for the krogan to join the war. She had also received word that there was a downed turian ship on the planet, on a sensitive mission. Anderson had emphasised how vital that mission's success was. The Admiral had told her that the team was the Ninth Platoon, led by Lieutenant Victus, was on a mission to disarm a bomb that Cerberus was gunning for.

That bomb had enough energy to ignite Tuchanka's atmosphere, it had been a safeguard by the turians should the krogan become a threat. Shepard understood the necessity of it, but measures like those had a habit of coming back and backfiring. And if Cerberus succeeded, that would definitely be the case.

Then there was news of the Dalatrass contacting Admiral Anderson, in

an attempt to talk the Allied forces out of giving the krogan the cure to the genophage. She said the shroud had been sabotaged by STG Operatives in order to prevent dispersion of the cure.

God that bitch is thick, Jane thought.

Shepard decided to tell Wrex about the deal the Dalatrass trying to make. He wasn't too pleased, but he was grateful that he was made aware of the situation.

"Reaper unit in front of shroud," Mordin said, displaying the battlemat via Omni-tool. "Poisoning Tuchanka air, problematic."

Cortana appeared via holographic display. "The Reaper destroyer is too close for orbital bombardment. We fire, we risk harming the Shroud."

"So what's the plan then?" Shepard asked.

"We need to go to the Hollows and rally the clans," Wrex said, "then there's that problem of Cerberus gun batteries."

John answered her question, his voice booming over his armour's speakers. "Third Element and Chalk-Five will go in and secure Ninth Platoon; Fifth Element will secure the gun batteries."

"Groundside is littered, sir," Rook said, "ODSTs won't be able to drop in safely."

"Frigates _Sterling_ and _Unto Breach_, will come in close to the Hollows and drop ground forces. We'll knock on the front door with the krogan, and Seventh Armoured. Air Force will be conducting CAST missions 'round the clock."

"I'll tag along with Third Element," Garrus offered, "the Ninth Platoon would prefer to see a turian face amongst the rescue partyâ€¦ no offense."

"None taken," Sandman said over the COMs, "meet us ground side."

"Sounds like a plan," Jane agreed. She finally felt that the war was truly swinging in her favour. Watching the UNSC decimate a couple of Reaper fleets will do that to a person.

"Ninth Platoon?" Wrex asked.

"Turian unit sent to help us, they got shot down," Shepard lied, hoping to avoid another war.

Wrex harrumphed, "came here to help, only to need help. Damn turians."

The Air Assault Force flew high over the Tuchankan atmosphere, careful of their approach vector. Already, the Claymores Interceptors and Broadsword Fighters were engaged by the Reaper Destroyer.

"This is Two-One Actual," a Claymore pilot said over the public COM channels, "We've got heavy Reaper air force here; recommend Vultures

wave off for now."

The Chief looked out the viewport to see the Greyhawks breaking off formation and hold steady.

"Shadow One-Three, breaking off. Fifth Element jumping in."

John could see the bay doors open, and the fully armed team, getting ready to jump. The moment the cargo lights pulsed green, the Operatives sprinted out of the dropship and streaked towards the planet surface.

"Fifth Element here, on target to gun battery," Arca informed over the COMs.

"Third Element en route to turian team."

â€|

****EN ROUTE TO CERBERUS FIREBASE (GROUNDSIDE GUNS)****

Plummeting through towards the Tuchankan soil at terrifying speeds is an anti-climactic experience. There was no air howling past Arca as he soared towards the planet, the weak gravity field and the lack of tumbling gave the impression of weightlessness suspension. The Operative might've believed that he was static, were it not for the altitude meter rapidly reaching zero on his HUD.

Off in the distance, he could see the Helljumpers' pod roar through the atmosphere, leaving a trail of smoke in their wake. Behind them were teams of Talons, and mechanised infantry riding in on Ospreys and Albatrosses.

"Ten minutes till we hit landfall," Arca said.

"Weather's getting choppy," Lotus warned. The moment they hit the troposphere, it will be hell to remain stable. Enhanced optics allowed the team to see the ODSTs struggling to keep their flight path stable.

As the black starry night faded into the brownish orange glow of Tuchanka's atmosphere, Fifth Element began to experience the problem of heavy winds.

"Genius idea for jumping in," Athena patronised. "We could've gone in on Greyhawks."

The team manipulated their shields to form massive invisible wings. Through their armour's computer's they could accurately guide themselves onto the correct trajectory.

"One minute," Arca said over the TEAMCOM.

Soon the Cerberus fortifications could be seen, they were well dug in with a company of armoured vehicles. Lotus reached into his back and deployed a couple of sensor drones to give them real-time troop movements.

"Why can't we just bomb the place?" Lotus asked.

"They need the gun batteries."

"Okay, so why don't we storm the place?" Palmer asked.

"They've rigged the place; we disable them so cavalry can come in."

The team reversed their posture, and landed on the wastelands feet first.

"Athena, you're team sniper, cover us," Arca said.

"Copy," Palmer complied. She doubled back to a rocky alcove and set up her the M770 SASR. Its ammunition is a .408 Calibre Armour Piercing Rounds, and of course, came with the Catalyst rounds. Making sure that they suppressor unit was attached and functional; Athena gave the all clear for her team.

Arca and Lotus engaged their active camouflage and slowly made their way towards the roaring cannons. The installation was entrenched on a slight elevation, and the walls were at least three storeys tall. Using the gravity manipulators, the two Operatives grasped onto the balcony silently.

Red outlines dotted Arca's HUD as he looked around. There were two Cerberus troops less than half a meter from the ledge.

"You're clear to take them out," Athena said over the COMs.

"Copy, Lotus, whenever you're ready."

Quickly, the two Operatives grabbed the Cerberus sentries and rammed their wrist blades into their target's jugular. They felt the body turn limp and dissolve. The Cerberus visors glowed gold as the ember coloured ashes burned away within the armoured shell, until all that remained, was the white and yellow livery. The empty armours' clattered onto the rocky soil, but was drowned out by the roaring guns and howling winds.

"Sniper looking at your direction," Athena said, and paused. Arca saw another read outline fade on his visor. "She's down."

Arca and Lotus quickly pulled themselves over the red metal barriers and onto the facility. Cerberus Fireteams patrolled the landings and walkways, while the Atlas Mechs and Makos ambled by. Using their wrist blades, they used the plasma edge to cut into crates and plant C12D and flashbangs. They made sure that the traps were inconspicuous before moving on.

"Detonators should be with garrison commanders," Lotus said.

"Too many centurions around, none of them look important enough," Athena deducted.

Smart, Arca thought. "Sensors are picking up a non-armoured signature, or not as armoured."

"Could be our guy," Lotus said.

"It's a woman."

"Whatever."

As the two slowly made their way towards the Command Centre, more and more, red outlines faded from their HUDs, sometimes two at a time.

"Hit the post from both sides," Arca whispered over the COM, "Lotus, hit them from the south entrance, I'll take north. Athena, the moment our traps go off, take down as many targets as you can."

"Affirmative."

Lotus swung around to the other door via unconventional methods. He leapt over crates and onto catwalks before landing softly at the southern entrance.

"Didn't bother to put up any doors," the Operative said.

Arca leaned up against the sand blasted concrete, and readied the Scattershot.

"Lotus, toss a flashbang."

"Copy. Three, two, one, mark."

The Cerberus Operatives inside the post rubbed their eyes and stumbled around aimlessly. A high pitch whine filled their ears, unable to register anything.

Lotus and Arca entered through their respective points, Scattershots blazing. Arca slammed the butt of his weapon across a centurion's visor, shattering it instantly and caving in his temples. The ONISAD Operative spun around and kicked an engineer in the chest, snapping his ribs like toothpicks. Lotus quickly closed the gap between him and the garrison commander, he took out her guards, turning them into ember coloured ashes before grabbing the woman by the throat.

"Clear," Arca said, moments before detonating the traps. Cerberus troops closing in on the Command Post were caught in an overlap of fire, shrapnel and shockwaves.

That was the signal for UNSC Airborne to come flying in. Sparrows dropped off 1st Division teams, while Ospreys ferried in platoons of Blood Talons.

"We're clear," Athena said over TEAMCOM. "Moving to your position."

A Greyhawk descended towards the base, Arca quickly ordered his team on board.

"Arca, Sandman here," the Third Element Leader's voice crackled over the COM. "we've extracted the turian team, and en route to the bomb site, uploading coordinates now."

"We'll meet you there."

The Greyhawk's engine hummed as it pulled into the toxic sky.

â€|

****APPROACH TO THE SHROUD****

Interspecies tension? Try intra-species while you're at it, John thought. The tension between Krogan Clans were extremely high, especially between Wreav and Wrex, who had contrasting views on what the krogan should be. In fact, tensions were high enough for both parties to temporarily forget about the Reaper threatâ€| that had made its way to the Hollows. Thankfully Eve was around to dispel the political tension and rally her species to the galactic cause.

Speeches, nerve been one for speeches, John pondered. Out of all inspirational leaders that had graced their kind, the Chief would have to be the one who made the least speeches out of them all. All he did was just _show up_, and soldiers would rally to him.

The Ares UHBT bounced slightly as its six treads rolled over a mound of rubble. Passenger compartments came as standard in all UNSC tanks, mainly for the purpose of transporting field doctors, engineers or fireteams into combat.

The convoy halted at an FOB, which was perched in the remanent of a Krogan CBD. John and Shepard climbed out of the tank. A few Krogans seemed agitated at the new alien presence that towered over them.

"You're late," the Arbiter said, looking at the Coalition Air Force engaging the Reaper.

Shepard noticed that the Elite sounded a lot like Admiral Anderson, except with a deeper and raspy voice.

"You're still ugly," the Chief retorted.

Thel gave a light chuckle. "It's good to see you again, Spartan."

"You too. Situation?"

"Fleet of Unyielding Resolve has just removed the Reaper fleet on the darkside of the planet. Special Operations Sangheili are aiding your Third Element as we speak. I've deployed a few Scarabs to engage the Reaper."

Jane looked at the heavily decorated fearsome Elite, and turned back to John. She recalled the personal accounts of these once great foes, fighting side by side to the very end. "Looks like this one will be easy."

"We won't need to get Kalros then."

Kalros, legend says that she is the mother of all Thresher Maws, Jane recalled, _the big fucking worm_.

"Looks like this one will be easy," Shepard said.

UNSC Mammoth Vehicles rolled alongside the krogan tanks and casted a great shadow over them as troops poured out onto the field. Bradley MAVs parked at defensive positions alongside Atlas MBTs and Ares Tanks. UNSC Armoured Warfare was nothing short of overpowering speed and precision.

Shepard turned gaze skyward as she saw five fiery streaks burn across the Tuchankan sky. _Griffin's_ she thought. The UNSC's precipice of Air Superiority roared in at such great speed that it ignited the atmosphere.

"Dropping payload," the squadron plot said.

The aircrafts released a stream of tungsten pellets, and casted a fiery tongue that licked at the Reaper Destroyer's shields. The Kinetic Barrier's sparked as it attempted to cope against the burning air surrounding it.

Next to fly in were the Shortswords. The Mark IIs flew over the battlefield and extended their missile racks from out of their bomb bay doors. Leaving a thick plume of smoke behind them, the HE/EMP Warheads found their target, engulfing it an orange fire ball and smoke.

"Shield's out.," Cortana said over the COMs, "it's vulnerable."

Arbiter turned towards a Zealot. "Send in the Scarabs."

"Yes excellency," he answered humbly. The Elite flicked on a COM channel and began relaying orders.

John turned towards an artillery battery of Javelins. "Light that thing up," he ordered.

"Yes sir," the officer said, "bring up the ionised macaroni!"

Macaroni? Jane wondered.

The Javelin artillery units moved into firing positions, aimed their guns directly at the Reaper, and fired. Streaks of orange-red fire streamed across the sky, as ionised tungsten Ferris rounds were hurled at the Reaper. Each firing vector was precise and calculated, so that should the rounds over penetrate the Reaper, it would not hit the Shroud. The Destroyer screeched and roared as the rounds punctured its body, raining debris onto the Tuchankan soil.

Two massive Type-47D Ultra Heavy Assault Platforms (Scarabs), accompanied by UNSC Titan MkIV Walkers, marched across the barren wastelands, opening fire on the Destroyer. With no shields to protect it, the energy weapons burned and boiled away at its hull.

From the west, platoons of Atlas and Ares speed across the sand, billowing up dirt, and opened fire. Under such merciless barrage from ground and air, the Destroyer faltered, and crashed to the ground.

"That wasn't easy," Keyes commented.

Easy, I could use a lot of easy, Shepard sighed, _then again, didn't do much todayâ€¦ except shooting a husk or two._

Soon the engineers were sent in to repair the Shroud, while Keyes and Mordin delivered the cure. A mist of gold rained down over Tuchanka, curing the krogan of the genophage. Looking around, Shepard could see the expressions of happiness and hope spread across the faces of the race.

They have a future now, Shepard smiled.

â€¦

****BOMB SITE****

Some measures always have a way of coming back and biting you in the ass, Garrus thought. He knew of the turian's backup plan since he had seen the files.

Lieutenant Victus had made a bad call, and now he was making up for it. He had led his men against the Cerberus onslaught to decommission the bomb.

"Arca, target right!" Sandman pointed to a shuttle.

"Copy that!"

The Operative raised his Ember rifle, squeezed the trigger and unleashed a hellish volume of bullets into the cockpit. The Depleted Uranium rounds penetrated the consoles and killed the pilot instantly, sending the Kodiak careening out of control.

"That thing's down!" Lotus yelled.

"How's that bomb coming?" Garrus asked the Lieutenant. Cerberus forces were stepping up their attack, but were suffering heavy casualties from UNSC airstrikes.

Two Firehawks swooped in, rotary cannons blazing. The bolts of hard light energy tore up the rubble and shredded anything in its path. One Atlas Mech was caught in the gun run, and was turned to slag before it could fire.

"Bypassing firewalls!" the Lieutenant answered.

Additional UNSC engineers were sending in drones to sever as many vital circuits on the bomb as possible.

"Athena, bring up the Epirus!" Arca ordered.

"Copy that."

The female Operative that Garrus recognised as Sarah Palmer, ran up to his sniping position, and unpacked a menacing looking rifle.

"Competition?" she asked.

"You're on," Garrus smirked. _She's going down_.

The turian squeezed the trigger repeatedly, blood and matter spilt onto the blackened rubble as he scored headshot after headshot on Cerberus forces with the N7 Valiant. However, the Epirus is an anti-material weapon, and it is difficult to compete against a semi-automatic anti-armour weapon.

Athena shot through the walls with the TAP rounds, shredding Cerberus soldiers apart. She slapped in another fresh clip, and shifted her aim onto an approaching armoured unit. The lead Atlas Mech fell over as the rounds shattered the cockpit, covering it in blood and killed the driver.

"Bomb's disarmed!" Victus said proudly.

Garrus smiled. _This kid has a bright future ahead of him_.

â€|

****THE HOLLOWS****

Everyone was accounted for, only light casualties amongst armoured forces. Shepard's eyes panned across the decrypted place, but no matter how overrun it looked, the hope amongst the krogan painted a bright image. Victory was theirs, and Wrex will uphold his promise.

"Thank you Commander," Eve said gratefully, "for everything. You have gave us a new future."

"Don't forget them too," Jane smiled, gesturing to John.

Shepard could possibly swear she saw the female krogan smirking, if that was somehow possible.

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****ABOARD **_**NIGHTWALKER**_**, TUCHANKA, HIGH ORBIT****

Carbon looked over the barren wastelands of Tuchanka. His hatred for fighting in the war had increased significantly over the past few days. So it was a relief to him and his team when they received new orders from Gaia.

...

High priority message****

You are to stand down, and await further instructions. I did not authorise this mission.

...

"So are we going in?" Oxide asked, stroking his beard.

"No," Carbon answered, running a hand of the scar, embedded on his dark skin.

"I really want this op to be over," Ozone

commented.

****XXxxxXX****

"_So why are you helping my mother? You're making a lot of enemies for yourself."

>_**~LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_I don't like people going back on their word. If some asshole didn't grow a mutated '_conscience'_, then the Spartan-Two program can be kept under wraps. I know your mother regrets the program, and she'll have to live with the guilt for the rest of her life."

>_**~Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge**_

"_They say she's cold and condescending towards the interrogators."

>_**~LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_Months of close observation will do that to anyone. The sooner we get her out, the better."

>_**~Arca â€" Anthony Stanforth Zhuge**_

****XXxxxXX****

****A/N:****

****Some of you have voiced concernsâ€| and it doesn't particularly help me if I don't know what is exactly wrong. And it doesn't help if you review anonymously, I can't follow things up.****

****So I would like to ask what I'm doing wrong in order to rectify it.****

****Have I devoted too much to character development recently? (Some of you have voiced that, and I shall add more gratuitous violence and blockbuster action. Be assured, I've done all the character dev I've needed so that these people don't feel like cardboard,)****

****What do you guys want exactly? I'd like to get some direction you know. I find that working within certain parameters is a challenge that I enjoy. (That being said, there are challenges I won't take on).****

****Do you feel like I'm drawing things out a bit too long? (Hopefully, you'll be pleased to know that we've returned to our usual schedule of following the ME3 Arc).****

****Bit too much sentiment? (Once again, that's for character development, you won't be seeing it againâ€| well at least not of the same calibre.)****

****So please, leave a review, and let me know.****

****Also, thank you to those who have given me pointers. And who actually wants me to write a conference? (It feels like I will be doing a repeat of **_**Welcome to the Ark).**_**

****Forgot to ask, but did anyone like Shepard going Spartan on**

Cerberus?*

â€|

And when the season's greetings comes round (that's politically correct right), I shall continue on writing. Summer holidays in Australia has its perks, it's combined with Christmas and New Year's.

37. Cleaning House

A/N: Now trialling a slightly different writing style.

Thought I'd let you know, OC's are to fill in places that I believe cannot be filled by canon charactersâ€|

**Thank you to those who gave me feedback. Especially Antares Starfier. Many thanks indeed. =)
>I will take it on board.

To Superemopwerz, thank you for answering my question.

So the polls:

A lot of you are happy with character dev, some want more, and others want less. I'll keep the current rate as is for a compromise, (and also I'm happy with it).

Action sequenceâ€| these things are quite draining to write, more so than character devâ€|. But both are damn worth it in the end. Do not fear, I shall not take the pure gratuitous violence part. In fact, if we go by definition, nothing in this story is gratuitousâ€| I hope.

Flirtingâ€| challenge accepted, my best friend is a ladies man, very suave. (From what I've been told, I don't join him on his escapades). So I should be able to weave something authentic in. (Yo Dawg, I heard you like romanceâ€| so I decided to write smutâ€| LOL jokes. Give it another 7 months and it will be legal for me to write about itâ€| which I won't. Oh hey look, number seven.)

People want the Chief to have a happy endingâ€| I do too.

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"_The Spartan-Twos were bred for war, and now that the UNSC knows the true reality behind the creation of the program. We are forced to create the Spartan-Four program in order to compensate for our dwindling number of Supersoldiers. But the reputation that Spartans' hold, it is symbolic amongst our armed forces. To have them participate in clandestine affairs would be detrimental to a fragile morale and public support. So the work's been shifted to ONISAD. Indoctrination (or Mental Condition as some would prefer) of Operatives, involves breaking down their psychology in order for them to be "reprogrammed". Due to our pool of candidates, all of them have strong morals and ethics; it takes about a week for them to be broken. Once training is completed, these Operatives can carry out kill orders without question. In the past, we've had Operatives

assassinate their own family and colleagues; they've carried out those orders quickly and efficiently. ONISAD is what the Spartan-Twos were originally meant for, and what the Spartan-Fours can never be. Even though I've greenlighted all Spartan programs, knowing full well of each and every one of their operations, ONISAD has committed the worst atrocities. But should the true nature of this program be revealedâ€¦ I doubt my treatment will be worse as Halsey. Apparently forty eight broken men killing "civilians" is not as bad as broken and vengeful children saving the human race."

>**-Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky, talking about the effective nature of the Spartan Programs and ONISAD**_

XXxxXX

ABOARD SSV **_NORMANDY SR-2**_**, SERPENT NEBULA, DOCKED ON CITADEL**

Without most of the usual cadre aboard the ship, things were fairly quiet. Most of the crew had gone off to Purgatory bar. Shepard wanted to stretch her legs and grab an iced mocha, so she and the Chief were heading towards Saresh Diner.

Running her hand along the grey weapon, Palmer had taken a liking to the M770 SASR Projectile variant. It was light weight, packed a heavier punch than the Ember, albeit at the cost of automatic fire and more ammo. But it really didn't matter since she could carry a hundred rounds in to combat, and that her nine out of ten times in a fire fight, she would score a hit.

Sarah turned around to face her team; her transfer to them was an easy transition, she expected some sort of crash course or something, but there wasn't. It was like being dropped into the deep end. It made her feel slightly uncomfortable. She had met _rookie_ ONISAD before, but they didn't have that attitude she'd seen in Spartan-IVs, it was cold, calculative discipline. The older ones were the one had humour.

She looked around the private lounge, which Fifth Element had unofficially claimed. There was a blue and grey themed designer bar in the farthest corner from the doors, three pairs of recliners stacked in every other corner of the room, an oak wood conference table in the centre, and off to one side were two couches and an entertainment unit. Sarah would've believed that this place was a high-end lounge rather than a lounge for military personnel. Interior designers had placed up cast lights along the white walls, covered in wooden panels and monitor screens.

The Spartan-IV shifted her attention to Arca and Lotus, who were sitting on the couches. Lotus was busy disassembling and reassembling his Ember rifle, while his teammate was heavily engrossed with writing an entry into his _paper_ book. She noticed that his hand writing was cursive, meticulous and neat, the type of hand writing associated with historical constitutions. _Hell, he'd put all my girl classmates to shame with his handwriting_, Sarah thought.

Whenever ONISAD was out of combat gear, Palmer noticed they would be wearing black suits and ultra-light armour, similar to UNSC Officers. _Paranoia runs high_, she concluded, she was wearing the standard fatigues of cargo pants, boots and the bodysuit. The bluish downcast

of the ship's lights seemed to give an eerie but human glow to the men.

Arca shifted in his seat, in his armour making slight tension noises as he moved. He quickly flipped the page before he had finished his entry, and tucked away the fountain pen into his top pocket.

"Adrian," she called. He never said he wanted to be called that, but Sarah could tell that he was happy with it. That being said, she only called him Adrian in private. Around company, it would be _Stanforth_ or Arca. The Operative looked up from his seat. She had no sufficient amount of free time, but now was as good as any.

"Yeah?"

"Can I talk to you guys about Crimson Two?" She asked, though it sounded more like a demand, a motherly demand more or less. Arca looked back at Lotus, who gave the former a curt nod.

"Sure," the Operative said.

Palmer walked into the centre of the lounge, and placed a holographic display onto the glass centre of the oak wood table. Arca and Lotus stood around the furniture, preparing for some kind of lecture. The small device, no bigger than a tennis ball, split open and projected a Citadel Hallway onto the table. The hallway itself was heavily damaged, bullet holes were still smouldering. But the centrepiece of attention was Spartan Fireteam Crimson Two, in a savage melee against three Cerberus Combatants. It was clear to everyone that the Cerberus Operatives were the more effective.

The replay footage had been pieced together by Crimson Two's armour sensors; they provided an intricate full colour 3D world, of the immediate vicinity.

"Plasma blades," Arca said, pointing out the Cerberus swords, "feasible by their current technological capabilities, but it would be flawed and inefficient. These aren't."

The statement raised more questions than answers. Sarah scrutinised the fighting styles of the Cerberus Operatives, brutal precision attacks was a key element in the way they fought. Palmer watched as the Operative standing in the middle, grabbed Alice by the arm, stabbed her under her left armour, before slamming her head with such shocking impact against the wall, that it left a sizable dent in the panel.

"Oh my fucking god," Arca whispered.

Sarah knew his expression wasn't something along the lines of awe of a Cerberus team defeating Crimson Two. It was the revelations of something worse, much worse, and to say Palmer didn't like it was an understatement.

"What is it?" she asked, there was a slight rise in her tone as she placed her hands on the table.

Lotus seemed to have the same expression on his face, as if he saw a ghost.

"There's no fucking way," he breathed, "no motive, no goal, no fucking way!"

"What is it?" Palmer asked.

Arca replayed the execution sequence again, by sending a signal to the projector via OPSAT (or tacpad). Sarah watched as the Cerberus Operatives quickly executed the team in a quick but brutal fashion, always aiming for the head.

"That doesn't make sense," Lotus whispered, "either kill them all, or spare them all."

Sarah watched how Katie was taken down. A Cerberus Operative had thrown her over his shoulder and slam her onto the bluish metal floor. Pinning her down, he attempted to dodge her, but in a split second, Katie managed to push herself across the floor, so in the end, the blade narrowly missed her heart. The recording showed how James quickly distracted the Operative, and in effect, saving Kate's life. However, moments just after Palmer had arrived on scene with Majestic, James got stabbed in the throat, before being slammed into the wall.

Wargames! Her mind screamed. Palmer's eyes were wide opened, blood drained from her face. She clambered at the wooden chair, and eased herself onto the red cushion. Resting her elbows on the table, Sarah clasped her hands, and fidgeted nervously. She looked up at Arca's clean shaven face; he had that mile stare in his eyes. She could tell that he knew what she knew, and she could assume the same from Lotus.

Arca swallowed, and breathed. "they're one of us," he whispered.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHTWALKER**_**, IN ORBIT OF CERBERUS HEADQUARTERS****

The ship's dorms were like any others. It had a sparsely decorated, utilitarian common room that doubled as a meeting room for the team. Wall mounted monitors provided a small amounts of illumination for the darkened space, as statistics scrolled across.

The COMs pinged, and Carbon moved to answer it. His dark skinned fingers danced across the console as he entered in the password, followed by the challenge ID. The return came as a positive, and so he let the coded message through.

Random symbols and letters appeared on the screen, but they all corresponded to an algorithm. Quickly decoding the message, he could only smile in relief at the order. And the moment Ozone and Oxide stood up from their game of chess to have a look, they too, smiled in relief.

â€|

****High Priority****

We have everything we need. Clean house. This operation is to be burned into the ground.

â€|

Without a word, the team geared up, and boarded their Cerberus Kodiak. Ozone went through the usual routine that wouldn't arouse any suspicion. He steered the vessel from a non-hostile vector, and upon entering the white hangar bay, he set down the white and yellow shuttle onto a landing pad.

As always, the hangar was bustling with activity, engineers continuously maintained the fighters and shuttles, making sure they were ready to go at a moment's notice. The Atlas Mechs stood menacingly in their bays, ready to repel any boarding parties.

Cerberus teams steered clear of the three Operatives, after all, they were the most fearsome presence in the area. Their domineering figure, and the blood lust glow of their optics, sent a clear 'do not disturb' message. Of course, the glow of the optics were mainly theatrics, and to scare the ill-equipped.

"Harper's office has everything we need," Carbon whispered over the encrypted TEAMCOM as they walked, "we take it, the station is under our control."

"What about security?" Ozone asked, referring to system encryption and firewalls.

"I've got that covered," Oxide said.

No one saw a small spark dance from his fingers and onto the console he brushed past. A few seconds later, all of Cerberus's dirty little secrets scrolled across his HUD, he'd seen them all before but he was after the security codes for the hour.

"Challenge is frost, countersign is ice," Oxide said.

A few moments later of adjusting a few things, the Operative smiled. "We have clearance for all levels, and Command is blind."

"Good," Carbon smiled.

Walk in, walk out, and nobody will suspect a damn thing. The doors practically opened without a second command, security checkpoints waved them through, everything was going perfectly. Eventually, the group reached a darkened cavernous room, with the remnants of the Human Reaper Larvae that Shepard and the Chief had destroyed. There were a few snipers and centurions around, but the Cerberus guards waved the three through.

"Can't believe he still keeps that thing," Ozone muttered, "gives me the fucking creeps."

Reaching the other side of the room via the narrow catwalk, they arrived at a long flight of stairs, illuminated by dull floor lights.

"Harper's office is just right up there."

The two Centurions standing guard at the doors stopped the group and checked the appointment roster. Seeing that everything was _okay_, the team was allowed passage.

Upon entering the office, Oxide took note of every detail. Harper's office was devoid of any plants or any other form of decoration, aside from the designer arm chair and hard-light consoles. The floors and ceilings were black marble, reflecting the sight of the massive sun that lay in front of the massive planes of glass, which acted as the sole source of lighting.

The Illusive Man was sitting his chair, talking to his entourage of scientists, in person.

"The results are positive, sir," a middle aged woman of African descent said, "we can control Reaperfied units with this signal."

"Excellent, when can we apply it to full scale?" he said with a smile.

"Lawson says in about a month, and the Reapers will be under our control."

Harper turned to face the men that Gaia had sent him. His heart thumped in his chest as he saw them wield weapons that were not in his arsenal. The optics over their left eye glowed a ghostly red.

"Light them up," Carbon ordered.

The team raised their weapons, and filled the air with Catalyst rounds. The guns hissed silently as gold streaks leapt from the barrel. Harper shuddered violently as the bullets dug into his body and explode. It was like fire ants crawling throughout his veins. He could only watch in horror as his flesh disintegrated into amber ashes. Scientists and assistants around him dropped like stone, before their body _dissolved_, until finally, all that was left, were shredded clothes and ash.

"Sealing the doors," Oxide said, another set of blast doors closed upon the existing doors.

"Purge the system," Carbon ordered.

Oxide nodded, he paced around the room, and using the wireless system, he assaulted the base's mainframe. Minutes later, airlocks began to open, rooms were depressurised, and all that remained, was silence. Bringing up a galactic map, the team could see all of Cerberus's deployment.

"Rerouting system control to Gaia," Oxide said.

"Good, let her take care of the rest," Ozone said.

They had dealt with the head, but the divisions were still useful, and hence could be repurposed rather than destroyed. If Gaia wanted the cells removed, all she needed to do was just tag the locations to the Coalition forces.

"It's not over, is it" Oxide sighed.

"When is it ever?" Carbon countered.

"We better start running," Ozone said.

None of them liked Operation PROMETHEUS, (i.e. Cerberus Initiative), the experiments conducted were cruel, and the attacks carried out on civilian populations were equal in measure. But over the recent months, Cerberus had reached its all-time lows of slaughtering millions. The team knew that if a 'clean house' order had been issued, then regardless whether they carried it out or not, they would be next. Might as well remove a few key players in the process.

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****CITADEL, ZAHKERA WARD, SARESH DINER****

"Alright, so these mechs are keeping them pinned, just laying fire down with its autocannon, and then this chick, this smoking hot chick, just sprints across the balcony right," a female Marine Private said. She was about 1.7metres tall, a slim face and dirty blonde hair. "the Chief, crash tackles the mech, knocking it over and bringing down the shields, so the chick could stab the pilotâ€| through the fucking canopy."

"Badass," an Alliance Marines said.

"Bullshit," another said disbelievingly.

From afar, Shepard and the Chief picked up the conversation with their sensitive hearing. Since they were wearing just military fatigues, many people just assumed they were officers out on lunch break. A couple of Spartan-IVs noticed John however, but they gave him a curt nod and a smile of respect before moving on to find a table, or grab a tray.

Jane shifted slightly uncomfortably on the metal bench. Rumours had a habit of spreading fast, and to be honest, she'd never heard anyone refer to her as a _smoking hot chick_. Looking at John, she wasn't too sure if he got the reference or the meaning behind those words. He did mention about working with ONISAD for a time, which would explain why he was on a friendly basis with Fifth Element, so it would be quite feasible that he understood all the memes and cultural reference, but it didn't really leave a mark on him. Something Shepard found slightly tragic.

"If I remember correctly, you distracted the Atlas, brought down its shield textbook style and then I jumped onto it and stabbed the pilot," Shepard said. "Funny how they didn't mention Rook."

John looked over at the squad of Marines telling the stories they have heard. His insignia glistened under the light as he moved. Turning back to Shepard, he gave a small smile. He knew that "_smoking hot chick_" is a compliment of some kind, not exactly flattering, but a crude compliment nonetheless. Seeing Shepard wince under the term, the Spartan-II guessed she wasn't too fond of it, then againâ€| the compliment did come from another woman. _Probably

trying to get the attention of her male cohort_, the Chief reasoned.

"It was a slightly messy stab," John added.

"Glad to see that you can remember things," Jane joked.

"So are you going to tell them how it really happened?" the Spartan asked.

Shepard looked at the group, before shifting her attention to the mocha in her hand. She watched beads of water collect on the ice cold glass, before answering the question.

"'Smoking hot chick' aside, I like their version better."

John gave a soft chuckle, before returning to his steak.

"So are you going to go and reprimand them, like any good officer?" Shepard smirked.

The Spartan gazed back at the group of UNSC and Alliance Marines discussing the supposed feats of their heroes.

"Let them have their fun," he said kindly.

The two lapsed into a comfortable silence, until a message from Lotus interrupted them. It was marked urgent, but empty. John frowned, his tacpad was encrypted on the highest levels, and so was ONISAD, if they sent a blank message, than it signalled a dire matter.

The Spartan quickly finished off the last of his chips, took a swill from the water bottle, and got up from the bench. Jane quickly downed the contents of the mocha, giving her a brief brain freeze.

"Ow!' she groaned.

John couldn't help but give a small smile; he knew Shepard had a weakness for lattes and mochas.

"Okay, I'm good."

"You sure?" he, "you looked like you were going to pass out."

"Ass."

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, SERPENT NEBULA, DOCKED ON CITADEL****

Sixth Element's motives were unknown, unclear, but Arca knew that they weren't rogue. Or maybe they were, either way, it was hardly good news. He sat down on the couch and decided to flick on his COM, and contact Keyes. Everything that had recently transpired was too much to be a coincidence.

"Donnie?" the Operative called on the encrypted COMs.

"Yes, Anthony?" came the reply.

"Where are you?"

"I'm on the Presidium with Liara."

The ONISAD Operative stowed away the information for later references.

"Can you get back to the _Normandy_?"

"Um," there was another pause, "sure. Give me a few."

"Sure."

The link was terminated, and so, Arca pocketed the earpiece. He looked over at Sarah who was pacing back and forth. Recent events had troubled her recently; it was a whole different kind of hell for her. Adrian could tell. He walked over towards her, and leaned against the window sill. Behind him was the war torn Citadel, the refugee docks was still in bad condition. Sure the Coalition had cleaned the place up, but there wasn't much they could do about the destroyed furniture and bullet holes. The bodies of the dead, had been arranged and cataloged.

"Sarah, you okay?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," she nodded, running a hand through her pony tail.

Rule number oneâ€| never lie to ONISAD who's majored in psychology, Adrian thought. He had spent years interrogating and reading people, only the greatest of actors could fool him. And Palmer was no actress.

"It's a world in full colour we live in, not grey, not black and white," Arca consoled.

"Are you guys involved in ops like that?" Sarah asked, though her tone suggested she didn't want to know the answer.

"Lotus hasn't," he replied.

"But you have."

Arca nodded.

"Jesus," she breathed.

"I'm going to ask you again," he said softly, "why did you join?"

"I just wanted to know," she answered, "what it would be like in your position."

His expression indicated he was satisfied with the answer. "You won't need to. When it's all over, you can return to the Spartans."

Another half hour passed until everyone returned. Chief, Keyes and Shepard had taken a seat around the oak wood table. Palmer and Lotus opted to stand at the end, while Arca moved to the other end, and set

up the communication. A bell chimed and Hood's holographic image appeared on the table.

"What can I do for you?" Hood asked.

"Admiral," Arca greeted, "we have possible evidence that an ONISAD team has gone rogue."

In his heart of hearts, the Operative felt that Parangosky was behind it all. Keyes had forwarded him a report about the attack on Northfold written by Anna Greenfield. Arca knew that the attack happened right after Section 0 stumbled on something dangerous. He suspected Sixth Element was heavily involved.

Hood looked and Shepard.

"She can be trusted, sir," John vouched.

The Admiral gave a slight nod, a gesture of good faith. "Go on then, Anthony."

"Recordings that Palmer, Bright and I have analysed, suggests that Crimson Two was killed by a team of ONISAD operatives, not Cerberus Commandos."

Hood was a smart man, a tactical genius and a brilliant analyst; it didn't take him long before he came up with a valid hypothesis.

"I understand," he said. "Do what you must."

"Yes sir," Arca said.

The transmission was terminated from Hood's end, but seconds later, Fifth Element had their tacpads pinged. The three promptly opened up the message, and upon reading the white coloured font upon the blue background of the screen, their blood ran cold.

â€|

**From: Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky
>To: All ONISAD

Sixth Element has gone rogue. Terminate on sight.

â€|

XXxxXX

"_Ackerson sends over a thousand kids to their deaths; no one says a goddamn word. Your mother's program killed thirty children, crippled twelve, but she gave us thirty who were invaluable against the Covenant. When the war finished, people abandoned her, people pinned the blame on her. She just proposed an idea, a concept, and now she has to pay for something I don't believe she has too."

>_**-Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, to LTCOL Doctor Essingdon
Dominic Keyes**_

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****A/N:** Ah the culmination of many chapters have wrapped up to this point. It's been worth it. And worth the wait for you I hope.**

****Please review** as always.**

****Thanks. =)****

38. Level With Me

****A/N:** Now trialling a new writing style.**

****This story faces exterimnatus** would you please be so kind to elaborate anonymous reviewer?

****To UltimateFanJob123** Beta 27
>I'm so happy you picked up on the reference
=').

****XXxxXX****

"_Sarah is one of those kind of gung-ho types. Her time with you guys should set 'enlighten' her."

>_****-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

"_Still mad about how she treated your mother, huh?"
>_****-Arca** Anthony Sanforth Zhuge (Adrian James Chen)**_

"_Nah, that is aimed at Fireteam Majestic except for Thorne. My gripe, is her lack of respect for anyone but the Spartan-Fours."

>_****-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC STEALTH CARRIER**_** NIGHT HORSE**_**, SOL, IN ORBIT OF PLUTO****

If anyone even thought of trying to attack _Night Horse_, they were a fool of epic proportion. The ship is heavily based off the now decommissioned Infinity-Class Cruiser; _Night Horse_ could easily fend for herself. And accompanying her is a Stealth Strike Group, composed of eight Prowlers and two stealth cruisers.

At the very heart of the _Night Horse_, is the Central Command of ONI, and specifically where Admiral Orlenda Parangosky resided. If anyone wanted to get to her through hostile action, they would have to fight through the naval escorts, and then battle against her personal guards of a hardened battalion of Helljumpers and a platoon of Spartan-IVs.

Her office's walls were of a light cream white colour, and were adorned with monitors, displaying the latest statistics and reports. On her curved glass desk, was the encrypted computer, specifically attuned to her biosigns.

Like all high-ranking officials, her quarter was encased in a Faraday Cage, so that even if a bug managed to get inside, it wouldn't be able to send anything out.

It had been a tough week for Margaret, but she had to do what must be done. She regretted ordering the kill order on Sixth Element, but they knew too much, and their loyalty to her would've waned.

She sat down on the black leather arm chair, and began looking through the files on her computer. Currently Fifth Element and Third Element are in the best position to cripple Cerberus's remaining operations, and take out Sixth Element.

Ever since the Coalition had decided to return, Operation PROMETHEUS was immediately under risk. Sixth Element was only the tip of the spear in the Operation. They were the ones who made resources get to certain places, and that certain people were recruited. But they were too close.

Parangosky opened up a message box on her computer, and began to send orders to Ninth Element. One of the Cerberus Teams had solid evidence pertaining to the existence of Leviathans, the creators of the Reapers. Having them around would be a boon to her cause, but they had laid dormant for millions of years, content with letting the Reapers run rampant. The Admiral concluded that the Leviathans were of no real tactical use, but possessed all the ability to bring her plan to ruin.

Recent reports have suggested that old enemies will return, and the Coalition didn't have enough resources to fight them off. Parangosky needed the Reapers to be under her controls. Cerberus has played its part, and now it was time for them to be reorganised.

Running her fingers across the hard-light keyboard, she sent Ninth Element the encrypted message.

â€|

****To: Ninth Element**
>Classification: High

Deliver NOVA warheads to coordinates YGA234 â€" X22345 â€" Z2345, and detonate.

â€|

Parangosky hoped that history will remember her as one of the many ONI Directors, and nothing else. She had condemned far too many. She had made Ackerson look like a war hero, while stringing Catherine Halsey up for the birds.

****XXxxxXX****

****ABOARD SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**, SERPENT NEBULA, DOCKED AT THE CITADEL****

At this hour, the lounge was always quite. The crew had taken some time off on the Citadel to relax. But for some, they preferred to remain on the ship. Arca turned his blue eyes onto Sarah. She was sitting on the couch, gazing at a photo; she looked stressed, and

uncomfortable. The Operative noticed her brush the bottom of her eyes constantly. He swivelled the conference seat around.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly.

Sarah turned, allowing Adrian to see her bewildered expression. "What else don't I know?"

"A lot," he answered, folding his arms. Arca rolled the chair over so that they didn't need to raise their voice. "It's a big shock to you, isn't it."

Palmer nodded softly, her pony tail swaying with her. Adrian leaned forward, resting both elbows on his knees. He reminded her of her first CO when she had just joined the Marine Corp. He held the same air of a veteran who had seen too much, the ageless weary.

His eyes seemed to invoke a guilty feeling deep inside her, and she could guess why. Sarah wasn't like Shepard, she had a cocky, gung-ho attitude and she had a history of making snide remarks about ONISAD. To her surprise, the Operatives brushed aside her comments or made some one-liner comebacks and left it at that. They didn't go out of their way to annoy her, and they kept to themselves. So naturally, she was taken slightly back by Arca's friendly greeting, and his calm personality.

"So you hunt down your own like dogs?" Sarah asked, barely above a whisper. She was just coming to grips with the clandestine world she was so oblivious too.

Adrian closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Nothing is clear cut in our world, Sarah. It's a bit too convenient about Sixth."

She knew exactly what he meant. There was no denying it; corruption ran far through the ONI hierarchy. And it was clear, Arca knew all there was to it.

"Tell me everything, I'd like to know," Sarah requested, "there's no going back."

Arca gave a nod of approval. Already in just a few short sentences, he had broken down Palmer's mentality. They couldn't afford the Commander running around with a gung-ho attitude. They needed her to be reserved, neutral, objective and calculative.

The Operative set up a few scramblers in the lounge, he doubted anyone would be spying on him, but it never hurts to play it safe. Satisfied, he sat down in the arm chair to Sarah's right, and began to give her a reality check.

"Parangosky's a bitch," Arca said.

Sarah was surprised at the comment. She turned to face Adrian more intently. She knew that he held many secrets, most of which would nullify her views. The back of her mind began to scream that this was a crash course for ONISAD, or at least the very beginning of it.

"And Colonel James Ackerson's an asshole," he continued.

"Why do you say that?" asked an intrigued Spartan.

Arca let out a soft sigh. "From what I've been told, you're not a fan Doctor Halsey."

Palmer winced under his intense gaze. Halsey is a war criminal; she kidnapped children and turned them into something else beyond human. It was why Sarah refrained from mocking all the Spartan-IIs she knew.

"I know you're reasons," Arca said, "could've learnt to be a bit quiet more often, and not call the boffins, eggheads. I digress."

He's using that language again, Sarah noted. Adrian and Bryce would only use an aristocratic register when they were talking to UNSC officials, or scrutinising someone. It made her feel uncomfortable when it was directed at her.

"Care to explain what you said earlier?"

Anticipating long hours of explanation, and getting Sarah acquainted with the clandestine world. Arca took off the ultra-light armour and black jacket, and tossed them into a spare chair. He then folded his white shirt up to just below his elbows, and clasped both hands together.

"The sole reason why humanity still exists is Doctor Halsey," the Operative began.

"She kidnapped children though," Sarah argued, but she didn't bother raising her voice. It was all a test, and a training exercise, this conversation.

"But those children were designed to survive and last," Adrian said. "She could've given ONI her concepts and ideas, and walk away. But she didn't. I'll put things into perspective for you; she's the lesser of the evils."

"What do you mean?" Palmer asked, tilting her head slightly.

"She did everything she could to make sure her candidates survived. Ackerson, the man that half the UNSC hero-worships? He proposed another Supersoldier program."

Sarah remembered the news bulletin, Colonel James Ackerson was a warhero, or so she thought.

"The Spartan-III program, sends kids into the meat grinder to buy us time," Adrian said. He sounded like a disappointed father who knew what his son was up to, but wishes that it wasn't true. "Is that fair on Halsey?"

"When I met her, she was, cold."

Adrian scoffed. "Halsey lost her husband. He was turned into a Flood Proto-Gravemind. Her daughter died near the end of the war. Then she gets the program wrapped up and tied around her neck."

"She kidnapped kids, took them away from their families. She deserves

to be punished," Sarah hard lined, and leaned back into the couch, relieving her thighs from pressure.

"What about Ackerson?"

"He deserves to be burned."

Arca seem to give a small smile of approval or sadness. It was difficult for Sarah to tell. He was testing and training her, that much was certain.

"You can't live your life dictated by black and white or grey. Everything has to be in colour," Adrian explained. "I may not like it, but at the end of the day, the ends justify the means. The kids were raised up okay, and humanity lived through the storm."

"They displayed sociopathic tendencies," Palmer argued.

"So do we," Arca said, referring to ONISAD, "you know the only thing keeping Parangosky from ordering Halsey to be assassinated, and to stop the Doctor from taking her own life, was her estranged son."

"She had a son?" Sarah asked, perplexed.

Adrian let a small smile creep up on his lips. Theatrics when used at the right moment always have powerful effects.

"His sister is Commander Miranda Keyes."

Her eyes widened in shock. "You're fucking kidding me; you mean the king of eggheads is her son?"

Arca's brow furrowed, displeased with her language. Palmer just realised how enigmatic the person beside her was. He may have revealed a lot of personal things about himself, but he still had so much more kept hidden in the dark.

He sighed like a disappointed teacher. "That egghead is the one that allowed us to live forever."

Sarah looked at the Operative, no matter how relaxed he looked; his body language emitted an aura of ruthless interrogation mixed with strong morals. He leaned forward; preparing to deliver the final strike to her mentality and perception.

"Spartan-Fours aren't really Spartans," he said, "you lack the discipline, you lack the training. You're just a ragtag of soldiers with augmentations and outfitted for light infantry work."

Palmer didn't bother to rebut the statement. She knew it was true, now looking back on things. Everything became so much clearer to her. Spartan Branch was really an expeditionary branch. And now that she was a part of ONISAD, Sarah stood in limbo; she couldn't identify herself as a Spartan, even if she had the armour and augmentations. But she couldn't identify herself as ONISAD either, she barely understood them at all.

It pained her; Adrian was breaking down her mentality. He was modifying her behaviour and changing her mentality, and she knew it.

But she didn't want to stop it. He had made her feel guilty for just about everything she'd done in the past, made her feel like an idiot for blindly following the wrong people without question. She hated him for it, but at the same time, she was immensely grateful.

Adrian took in another deep breath. The low lights failed to show his face, giving his eyes a starker contrast. They were somewhere between human and soulless. He shifted in his seat again.

"To be a Spartan, means to be discipline, to be quiet. There's a reason why Halsey didn't like the Fours. You had too much attitude that you didn't bother to curb."

Sarah had to admit that from time to time, she would make some remark about another unit. The trust that Adrian had placed in her, the kindness he had used to greet her with, she knew it was all a test to get her acclimatised to be with ONISAD. But he also warned her about the division in his own allegorical and cryptic way.

She noticed that there was a stark contrast between Arca and Lotus. The former was like the best and worst of humanity rolled into one person, while the latter was like a joker in an elite outfit. Sarah could tell who the more _innocent_ one out of the two was.

"So what do you want me to do?" Sarah asked, exhausted.

A few statements were all it took, to break her down. She couldn't help but laugh inwardly at the notion. A Paramilitary, breaking a soldier.

"Be silent," Arca answered, placing an arm on the arm rest. He let a short pause make its way into the conversation, before continuing again. "I know how it feels."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. He was jumping all over the place. It had to be part of the mental conditioning; it got the subjects thinking and hence made them vulnerable. In all honesty, no one had made her feel so helpless and bewildered before. The scarier part of it all was that he was sitting less than a metre away from her, in a non-hostile manner.

"Know how what feels?" she asked, averting her gaze to the carpet floor.

"Mental conditioning and behavioural modification," he said, "I couldn't let you parade around with your cocky attitude."

"You changed me?" Sarah asked, her tone remained calm, but slightly perplexed.

"Trust me on this, if you kept your old attitude, our world will hit you like a ton of bricks," he said, using the age old cliché.

And without so much as a movement from Adrian, he no longer looked like a cold and calculative Operative, just a man who had seen too much.

Goddamn, he's one fucking good actor, she thought.

"To be a part of ONISAD, you need to be objective for as much as

possible," Adrian got up from the chair, and pulled on the light energy shielding module from his light armour. It was discreet and barely noticeable. A favourite for all undercover Operatives. But he didn't bother pulling on the vest and shoulder pads; instead, he tied an arm band onto his muscled bicep (something the shirt failed to hide). It was a medical arm patch, he was going to go and help out at a medical bay. "I'll leave you alone for a few hours. Think on what we've said."

"Before you go," Palmer said softly, "what made you join?"

"My brother was killed at Corbulo," Adrian explained, "I was at Exemplar at the time, so I put in an expression of interest for the UNSC. Also I wanted to be closer to dad."

Sarah watched as he walked out of the lounge and into the hallway, the doors closing behind him. She could honestly say she felt like a different person. Palmer analysed Adrian's behaviour. She noted how he placed a lot of emotion behind mentioning his brother, but just casually mentioned his father. A bit too casual for someone who might have father issues.

Okay, so he's met me a long time ago. She listed._ Only back then, I knew him as just Arca, or Anthony Stanforth Zhuge._

Palmer's reasons for joining ONISAD, was to mainly understand them. Her attitude had been arrogant and cocky, to ward off hormonal men, but at least she had matured over time—albeit a very long time. She wanted to see if she could handle the clandestine world, there was something about it that attracted her to it. Crimson Two's death was an incentive to stay.

ONISAD, an eye opening job, she thought_, that should be their—our motto_.

Sarah sighed; she could already tell that she was truly becoming one of them. She couldn't tell if that was a good or bad thing. She decided to settle for good.

Okay, so I've been one helluva a bitch to everyone, she pondered. _Well, at least they don't have a full blown vendetta against me—and shit, wonder what Keyes really feels about me. Knew that guy was way too nice. Been getting a bit close to Liara too._ _Ah hell, I really got posted to a fucking loveboat—or one fucked up boat._

—

****CITADEL, PRESIDIU COMMONS****

The artificial sky had faded to black, and people were now out enjoying the nightlife while trying to forget about the war. But John was in deep thought. If his time with ONISAD had taught him anything, it was that John had to think for himself. Doctor Halsey left behind a legacy that became marred by jealousy and corruption, so much so, that bureaucracy was making its way into what was predominantly military.

The crowds parted, allowing John and Shepard to walk through the malls with relative ease. His height and uniform was extremely

intimidating. Off-duty UNSC soldiers stood aside and saluted him as he passed. None of them recognised him as Spartan-117, he had taken a mental note to remove the number tag, and replace it with _Richards_. The soldiers would just assume he was another Spartan, the chrome stripe unique to the Twos was not widely known.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Shepard asked as they passed a clothing store. She was wearing her dress blues, in order to signify her rank and display the message 'shove off, I'm busy' to her _fanclub_.

"Just about what happened on the ship."

"Oh."

The Chief wasn't going to lie; he couldn't fathom what it would be like to turn against fellow colleagues and teammates. But all of ONISAD had just been ordered to kill Sixth Element, by the most ruthless woman in the UNSC. John absolutely hated Parangosky, of course he'd never voice that opinion.

So, he wasn't too sure that Sixth Element had gone rogue, more or less, they were just carrying out orders, and Parangosky needed to cover a few loose ends.

John had already adapted to the clandestine world a long time ago, in fact, that was what the Spartan-II Program was originally meant for. But when the Covenant showed up, he and his Spartan brothers and sisters were treated like military hardware by most. Hence they were always on the frontlines.

After everything had settled down, the remaining Spartan-IIs were tasked with hunting down Insurrectionist Cells and Crime Rings that threatened UEG/UNSC valued locations. But even then, the job was straight forward. There was no blur in allegiance, just an objective to complete.

But now, John wasn't too sure. The clandestine world felt alien but at the same time, it felt like home too. Maybe it was because he understood it so well.

"Things get fucked up pretty quickly, huh?" Jane asked.

She never had any views or delusions that the UNSC/UEG was fully paragon. But having men ordered to kill their own, that was something else entirely. It was a sacrifice on a whole different level, and Shepard knew sacrifice. All N7s do. Though no matter how _friendly_ Fifth Element appeared to be, Jane knew she could never get them to open up. They're deniable Operatives, the spooks, the Prowlers, the Predators. These are the men that broken combatants screamed about in their nightmares. These are men who are feared personified.

But, Shepard noticed that Palmer was slightly uncomfortable with the team. Jane knew that the Spartan-IV had been assigned to them as a liaison, but she did look out of place. Sarah is a soldier, not a spook.

The Chief and Shepard descended down a flight of stairs and onto a restaurant that overlooked the Presidium lakes. It was the restaurant that Jane had taken him to the first time they were here.

"I reserved us table," Jane said casually, "and your favourite."

"I only had the dish once," John corrected.

"I'm hungry you ass," Shepard chuckled, shaking her head lightly. Brushing aside a stray lock of her brown hair, she turned to the asari waitress.

"Commander Shepard, so good to see you again," she greeted warmly, "please follow me to your table."

The two sat down at the table on the balcony, surrounded by a flower garden, and shaded by a pear tree. Ferries were slowly passing by on the waters, hosting parties or functions aboard. After ordering their meals, John decided to start a conversation, much to Shepard's surprise.

"Next moves?" he asked.

Jane paused and mulled over the question. "I've received an email from Miranda lately, I need to meet up with her tomorrow noon."

"Want me to tag along?" John asked, pouring two glasses of water.

Shepard shrugged, "she'll probably want to see me alone. But I need you to go and pick up Thane from the hospital."

"As you wish," John said.

"Why do you say that as if I'm your CO?" Jane asked perplexed.

John shrugged.

"Ad now you're back," she said, referring to his lack of reply.

The food arrived moments later, followed by the beverages. As always, Jane had an iced mocha or mocha frappe, with extra cream and chocolate sprinkles. She noticed John giving her a slight disapproving look as she slurped the ice cold liquid through the straw.

"What?"

"Let's talk about your dependency on caffeine," he joked. He sounded like a shrink, probably qualified to be one too.

"Ass," Jane retorted.

****XXxxxXX****

"_Smallâ€| my mother doesn't do small. Everything she does is made to be strong and made to lastâ€| even her coffee is like that. She had the choice of not leading the Spartan-Two Program, she could've let Section Three start the program without her, but she didn't, why? They would've gotten someone spineless, someone less qualified to do it."

>_**-LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Anyone see the plot twist coming?****

****Did you know I dropped at least half a dozen hints throughout the story?**

**>Attack on Northfold
Sixth Element's deployment censored. (Only Hood or Parangosky could do that).**

>UNSC _Nightwalker**_**

****Some quick questions, what are your:**

**>Opinions of Palmer?
Opinions of Lasky?**

**>And Opinions of Halsey?
(Both in canon and the lore I've set up here.)****

****As always, please review. And yes, Thane Krios will be coming back onto the *_**Normandy**_**, while his son Kolyat, will be tagging along with N7 Squads.****

****And seriouslyâ€¦ I don't feel like writing a bloody conference scene.****

39. Assets

****A/N: AmayshunAyshun is the 777****th**** reviewerâ€¦****

****Also, to Minor Itch, Chief/Tali pairing you ask? Breathes in sharply this is something I can't exactly do.****

****Still a bit vague, that one anonymous viewer that said this story faces extermination.****

â€¦

****And fineâ€¦ you get you're conference scene. I will try to make this as realistic as possible.****

â€¦

****I wonder if I can hit the million word mark with this storyâ€¦****

****XXxxXX****

"_Advanced-Augmented Reconnaissance and Clandestine Operative Program, starts officially when candidates graduate from tertiary educationâ€¦ unofficially, they're selected from birth, and passively enhanced. It's our solution to the lack of Spartan-Twos."

>_-Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky, talking to about the AARCO-Program before its merger into ONISAD**_**

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC *_**NIGHTWALKER**_**, (SIXTH ELEMENT â€"DISAVOWED)****

Oxide sat in the ship's common room wearing casual fatigues. He felt

sick, horribly wrong. Leaning both elbows onto the metal table, he buried his face into his pale palms. Ozone had put on Lord of the Rings for them to watch, but it did little to serve as a distraction from reality. They weren't too sure if Parangosky had tasked another ONISAD team to hunt them down, but it was most likely that she did.

The Operative couldn't help but scoff at the irony. The inside term for ONISAD Field Operatives, was Arcani. The name was derived from a game and the abbreviation of the training program. Arcani were in effect "Roman Ninjas" of their time, they were fast, powerful and caused fear amongst enemy armies. Their other name was Areani, but many considered that it didn't have the chilling effect as Arcani. Oxide guessed that was how Arca got his callsign. He was the first to complete the AARCO-Program and had a track record of making Innies and pirates wet themselves. That in itself was another irony. Areani were composed of pirates, barbarians and mercenaries, paid to be the recon elements of the Roman armies and instil fear into non-Roman settlements.

Remembering his old history lessons, Oxide knew that the Areani (Arcani) had helped instigate The Great Conspiracy which crippled Roman-Britain for a prolonged period. In the end, the Areani were disbanded. Oxide could draw so many similarities between ONISAD and the Areani, but what set them apart, was one side had morals and the other had none.

Ozone set a cup of hot chocolate in front of Oxide, and sat down in the padded chair next to him. They all had the same look in their eyes, sadness, despair, weariness and bewilderment.

"Okay, man?" he asked.

Oxide turned his brown eyes onto the bearded Maori face. They all had grown beards but their hairstyle varied. Carbon's hair was closely cropped, Ozone was bald, and Oxide preferred to keep his neatly trimmed. They had to shave sometime soon.

"Do you think Parangosky would put a kill order on us?" Oxide asked.

"Mike," Ozone said, using the Operative's cover name, "we helped her start Cerberus, she ordered us to kill Harper, so what do you think?"

"Yes," Mike sighed. "Then why the fuck did we give her control of Cerberus's mainframe?"

Ozone scoffed. "She already had access from the very beginning; we just gave her the impression that we're still loyal."

Oxide folded his arm onto the table, shoulders sagging. "How the hell are we going to find a way out?"

At this point, Carbon entered. He was of African and British descent, so his skin had a light brown hint to it. And unlike most ONISAD Operatives, his eyes retained their usual brown colour. His boots thudded across the metal deck as he reached the dining table.

"I have an idea," he said.

"Shoot," Ozone said with a slight nod.

"We go to the Citadel and then we contact Fifth."

Oxide shook his head slightly, the plan was innately flawed. "Fifth is running with Shepard, who I might add, hates Cerberus's guts. She would know of our apparent _betrayal_."

"We don't even know if Parangosky has put a kill order on us," Carbon rebutted.

"C'mon man," Ozone sighed, toying with his drink. "She asked us to kill Harper and take Omega. You know what she did to Halsey. She'll do the same to us."

"Exactly my point," Carbon said, "Arca and Greystone hate Parangosky. We talk to them, then maybe we can get our lives back."

Oxide scoffed, and turned his gaze at the team leader. "The Ice Queen is smart, she'll have contingencies."

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****CITADEL, PRESIDIUM, DENSAR CONFERENCE CENTRE****

The Conference Hall was more comparable to a large performance theatre. It was outfitted with deep velvet red armchairs for the audience, navy curtains hanged from the walls, and the light cans were mounted within glazed glass panels.

Above the centre of the stage, were holoprojectors, where the logo of the Coalition rotated. Amongst the panel of Coalition scientists and professors, sat Doctor Delilah Orton. She found the navy blue padded army chair with a chrome finish to be quite comfortable, albeit a bit small. Now that she thought about it. Most of the alien races seemed _small_. Alliance Humanity was slightly taller, but not by much when compared to UNSC humanity.

Delilah deduced that the height discrepancies were due to passive enhancements and gene therapy available to humanity living in Coalition held space. The more the scientist thought about the matter, the more she realised how _big_ the Spartans actually are, especially the Twos.

Focusing back on the Council Species, Delilah recalled the anti-human campaigns which many are rapidly trying to tear down. The non-humans, they certainly feared the UEG/UNSC.

After a few more minutes, more delegates turned up. It was time to begin the conference, and the UEG's number one rule was, _don't give them ideas_.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-**_**2 SERPENT NEBULA, IN ORBIT OF THE CITADEL****

Like any other UNSC Gym, the one installed aboard the _Normandy_ was lined with reflective white tiles and glass wall panels, while the

floor was carpeted with navy blue. Each section of the gym was divided into areas that focused on a certain aspect of training, while over on the far side away from the entrance was the sparring ring with spectator benches. Of course the ring could be converted into a basketball or any other sport that required similar space.

The workload had certainly eased up over the past few days, something Jane was absolutely pleased with. It meant that she no longer had to play hero, no longer had to be that one figure that everyone looked to. Because she knew that if she fucked up, then the galaxy would fall to shit.

Shepard paced back and forth around the ping pong table, catching her breath. Playing against a wall, (i.e. herself) was very tiring. But it served as a good distraction. Ashley's death was really starting to set in, and Thane had already sent her email to say that he saw the bodies of Doctor Chakwas and Kelly Chambers. It was something Jane really didn't want to hear.

Chakwas was like a godmother, everyone's go to when they had grievous wounds. And Kelly, she was that cheerful person that brightened up everyone's mood. Losing them was a harsh blow, especially to Jane, who viewed them as family.

She wondered what John felt when he heard the news. He was quiet, but something about him just spoke of disappointed weariness. He had saved their lives, but in the end failed when Cerberus Forces killed them.

Jane thought about ONISAD, Arca identified the "rogue" group as Sixth Element. She didn't know what to think of him. He was more enigmatic than John when she first met him. Shepard wondered if Arca and Lotus were contingency plans against her. She doubted it, but the prospects were there, and it made her feel uncomfortable.

Best to keep them around either way, she thought. I'll just have to watch my back.

Shepard pondered about Commander Sarah Palmer, the Spartan Branch liaison with ONISAD. She found it odd that they would have a Commander as a liaison, but then again, Jane knew about unofficial operations, and guessed that Palmer would be working alongside Fifth Element, most likely as a monitoring agent.

There was also talk of finding a replacement for Greystone, the Operative killed on Earth. Jane could guess how that call would've felt, having to find a replacement for someone very close.

Palmer was vague on the topic, but she did mention that there was a strong bond between Arca, Lotus and Greystone. And when Greystone died, the remaining two dulled.

Stuffing away her thoughts, Jane picked up the ping pong ball again, tossed it into the air, and flicked her paddle over the ball. It was slightly difficult to pull off with a shakehand grip, but Shepard executed it perfectly. The orange ball bounced off the blue table and brushed the nets, before bouncing on the other side and onto the hard light wall.

The patter of the bouncing ball quickened as Jane increased her shots and parries, but eventually she outdid herself, and smashed the ball. The parody of a sphere landed unceremoniously on the other side of the nets.

But before Shepard could go and retrieve another ball, Traynor's voice sounded over the COM. "Commander, you have an appointment on the Citadel."

Meeting Mirandaâ€¦ almost forgot.

"Thanks Traynor," Jane said. She still added that extra tone of warmth, mainly because Traynor was still adapting to military life.

Shepard left the paddle on the table and walked to the change-rooms. Knowing that there wasn't much time left, Jane was already barefoot by the time she reached the tiled floor. Quickly removing her grey shorts and t-shirts, she entered the showers and let the hot water cascade down her back.

â€¦

****PRIVATE LOUNGE****

Normandy's private lounge, it was always the private lounge that got people into a reminiscent state. Of course there were other lounges aboard the ship, but they were filled with crewman playing cards or some other loud activity. Sarah wanted to go join them, but after her talk with Adrian, her desire for those things seemed distant. It riled her up to know that he and a few others could make her feel this way, with just a few words and subliminal body language.

Some of the questions that had been answered, Adrian had answered before, albeit slightly differently. Each time Sarah asked him the same question again, he'd give the same answer, but with another angle to it. She wondered if it was all a test or some training exercise, or that he was actually feeding her bits of information, maybe both.

Now that she thought about it, she wondered if he knew anything personal about her. She wouldn't be surprised if he did. Calculative and meticulous, that much was reflected in his mannerisms. Where Palmer had to worry about getting her people through alive, ONISAD Operatives had to worry allegiances. Realising that, Sarah no longer felt an ounce of jealousy against them, just happy to be second (or third) best in this scenario.

"So do you think we should get him in?" Arca asked Lotus.

The two were discussing a sensitive topic, both personally and professionally Sarah could tell by their body language. Both of them had hunched forward, hands clasped and minimal movement.

"I don't know," Lotus sighed. He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. "I thought Palmer already _replaced_ him."

Sarah winced inwardly as she noticed how he referred to her name. It was filled with that level of contempt that would make anyone

uncomfortable. She and Lotus didn't always get along, their views varied greatly. What she saw as Spartans, Lotus would call them amateurs on steroids.

"She's a liaison," Arca said. "We need a full time replacement."

Bryce tilted his head. It was clear that he was uncomfortable with replacing Greystone.

"He's got the right mentality, aptitude and the intelligence," _Anthony_ explained. "If it helps, he's already with ONI."

Louts turned his gaze to the oak timber floor. "Alright," he sighed, "let's get him on board."

****XXxxXX****

****CITADEL, HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL****

Even though John wasn't wearing his MJOLNIR Armour, a few people from the Coalition did recognise him. Most had served on _Infinity_. He had been told that his face was something that could be easily forgotten.

The insignia glistened on his uniform glistened as he walked through the hospital's foyer, and there was Thane, waiting for him. The Drell looked to be in good health, and his clothes were clean. He stood at the window and gazed across the recovering Citadel.

As John neared, Krios turned around, and gave a welcoming smile. "It is good to see you again, Chief," he said in his raspy voice.

"Krios," the Spartan replied courteously. "Shepard requests that I take you back to the _Normandy_."

"Of course," he smiled, "it will be nice to know what has changed."

The walk back to the ship was done in a comfortable silence. Thane wasn't one for a conversation, just like John. Both beings were reserved, and talked freely with those they truly trusted and were comfortable with.

John's mind wandered back to ONISAD as they were walking along a balcony. He didn't have much of an idea on their training Program, but he could only guess that it was extremely gruelling. He knew that children are more susceptible to indoctrination; he knew full well that he had been conditioned by the Spartan Program to be perfect, something he didn't mind. But he also knew that candidates for ONISAD would've fully self-actualised and thus developed their own morals, ethics, code of conduct and stance. This meant that they're susceptibility to indoctrination would be extremely low. They would have to be broken down mentally, before being rebuilt from the ground up.

Still, they retained shreds of their former self. John had witnessed ONISAD Operatives hesitate before shooting an _unconventional_ combatant. Of course the hesitation was extremely minor; it was long

enough for the Spartan to notice.

It all made John wonder what Sixth Element's involvement with Cerberus was, and how far it went. He suspected Parangosky was behind it all. And if that was true, she would no doubt have more than just Sixth to do her dirty work.

He didn't know why, but he had a gut feeling that the fighting ahead will not be as clear cut as it has been so far. He knew that a clandestine war inside ONI is inevitable. Ever since the UNSC and UEG merged all of their Intelligence Organisations under the one roof, a conflict in interests amongst the ONI Command was a guarantee. It was something blatantly clear to anyone who worked with ONI.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE**_**, IN ORBIT OF PLUTO, SOL SYSTEM****

The console Parangoky's computer flashed again, washing the glass table in blue light. Another ONISAD team had taken casualties. It was clear why; they had been deployed deep inside Reaper territory, monitoring enemy movements and training resistance groups, casualties were bound to happen.

A few hours ago Eighth Element had lost one of their own, while planting a nuke on a Reaper. Tenth Element was effectively out of commission after being ambushed, leaving two dead and the last critically wounded. Ninth Element had just confirmed their detonations of the NOVA bombs over the Leviathan homeworld, however their transmission was cut short.

Too many casualties and not enough replacements, Margaret knew that sooner or later, they would need to pull in people from the Spartan Branch. She opened another ONISAD report.

â€|

_**Office of Naval Intelligence
>Force assessment
Report**_

**Classification: Epsilon**

**-ONISAD**

All ONISAD Operatives have been recalled back to active rotation. However, casualties have been extremely high in recent weeks. Although wartime protocols have allowed us to boost the Division's number significantly, casualties have been just as high.

_Dead: 26 (Since the start of the Reaper-Allied War)
>Total deaths: 38
Active: 58_

Casualties can be attributed to a possible lack of experience amongst Operatives. It is inadvisable to split up experienced teams as they have been optimised for perfect synergy. However, to fill in the missing places, it is advisable to pull in suitable candidates from Spartan Branch and other ONI Military Units.

**~ARG**~

Significantly larger than ONISAD, veteran ARG Operatives are being transferred to ONISAD to bolster up numbers.

_Dead: 46 (Since the start of the Reaper-Allied War)
>Total deaths: 5344
Active: 13057_

ARG Teams operate constantly behind enemy lines to provide intel to ONISAD and NavSpecWar Teams.

â€|

Margaret frowned, ONISAD or the Arcani Program, conditioned every Operative to carry out his duty to the letter. Someone from Spartan Branch could very well destroy the ethos of the Division. Hell, the Admiral wasn't sure if Palmer's transition (as a liaison) was beneficial, but reports from Fifth Element said that she was assimilating perfectly. Though putting her on sensitive "Intel gathering" Ops wouldn't be a good idea. Arcani's methods were unethical to say the least.

The Admiral knew that most Spartan-IVs displayed certain bravados that allowed them to forge a strong bond with one another, but it did destroy a level of professionalism and discipline.

Cleaning house is getting costly, she sighed.

Another email appeared on her messages, it was from Fifth Element. It was marked as a request, selecting the flashing icon, the message scrolled down the screen.

â€|

_**From: Anthony "Arca" Zhuge
>To: Admiral Margaret Orlenda
Parangosky_

_Admiral, _

_Commander Sarah Palmer's behaviour has "improved" by our standards. Her intuition is adapting.
>I would like to put in another request for another squad member. Palmer is a liaison and we do need to have a full-timer.

_Bright and I would like to have Agent (Spartan) Gabriel Thorne (___if he accepts, of course___). _

I have gone through his file, and his personality and intelligence quotient surpasses ONISAD baseline requirements.

Thanks

~Arca

â€|

Margaret noted how the Operative signed as his callsign, not his

cover name (then again, all ONISAD Field Operatives had dozens of cover names). She wondered if it was a sign he was becoming detached. The Operative had a history of being allegorical and cryptic; the psychiatrists always said that he had a knack of understanding medieval and renaissance literature. And those texts are filled with hidden and subtle meanings.

But there were more important things to tend to for now. Parangosky had to approve of the request, and move hidden assets into the Terminus system.

****XXxxXX****

"_Aegis Defence Contracts, a bunch difficult to define, they're trained by ex-UNSC soldiers. Well-trained, well-armed, their stomping grounds are in the red zones and critical yellow zones. We get along okay with them in the yellow zones, but in the red zonesâ€¦ well, shoot them before they shoot us."
>_**-Sandman, to Arca**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** This chapter is mainly to set the stage for the next plot arcâ€¦ which I am very excited to write. And if you're wondering, Cortana will join the Chief again to kick ass and take names.**

â€¦

****Palmer really is a character left up to interpretation. I've read a lot of opinions about her, and all of them are true in their respective ways.****

****Also, I've read an article that estimates the humanity's future technological advancement. Halo has a lot of it spot on the mark, though I'm not too sure about weapons though. You'd think that a race that has developed FTL methods of transportation, would've developed DEWs to the point of mass production, or have rail guns available for mass production (for infantry).****

****That being said though, they do mention that humans will become significantly stronger through gene therapy and other passive enhancements (such as cybernetics). (Would explain why four Marines could turn a warthog, and how three ODSTs could crash tackle a Brute Chieftain).****

****So with thatâ€¦ I think it's safe to say that your average UNSC soldier is pretty badass in his own right, and the Spartan-IIIsâ€¦ ARE GODS!****

****Hmm, you'd think the Chief would have a younger biological age (in Halo 4) than 41. It's like all the time in slipspace and cryo amounted to no years being shaved off. (Excluding the stranded in space).****

****Please review, I live off it.****

****A/N: MANY APOLOGIES! I've been on holiday for just over a week now, and I'm sorry to say that I haven't posted anything. It was mainly due to the fact that I've been out working.****

â€|

****Yeah, rereading, (for the fifth time) I noticed my inconsistencies with Shepard's appearance. Soâ€| this is how it's going to work.****

****She has, deep brown hair, and she used to have brown eyes, but after augmentations, she has blue. Okay, I think we're all on the same page about her appearance now.****

****I smell another touch up around the corner. (Haven't done one for over sixth months, how very bad of me).****

â€|

****So, what possessed you guys to think that I was going to do a Chief/Tali pairing? (And it's a common thing in this fandom? â€|spits out tea- my god! **_**"The wank-fest has already begunâ€| and we are hopeless too stop it."**_**

****[Sorry guys, I'm a bit high-strung since school has ended for the year.]****

â€|

****To Hostisâ€|.. I love my strawberries smothered in sugar (how I'm still thin? I credit that to my metabolism)****

â€|

****Conference segment be damnedâ€| I'll write it later (in the next patch). I've attended five of them in the past fortnight. And it would just be like doing ****another**** recount of the UNSC's history.****

****XXxxxXX****

"_Fuck, this is within my pay grade."

>_-Greystone**_**

"_What's wrong with flying cars? I thought you liked flying."

>_-Zvezda**_**

"_But not in a bloody car."

>_-Greystone**_**

[Greystone to Zvezda during an incursion into a moderate yellow zone]****

****XXxxxXX****

****XXxxxXX****

****SERPENT NEBULA, CITADEL DOCKING BAY D24****

The docking bay windows always provided a nice view of the Citadel. And in times like these, the station was becoming a safe haven for those running away from the Reapers. Overcrowding was no longer an issue as UNSC Logistical and Engineering Divisions were building orbital habitats for those displaced by the war.

Walking across the blue halls and past the milling groups, Shepard's enhanced senses picked up on Miranda Lawson's mannerisms. The Operative wore heels, and on a ship like _Normandy_, heels were quite noticeable. Jane knew that there was an elegant rhythm in the way Miranda walk, it was a click followed by the soft slap of the sole.

An average person wouldn't pick up on something like this, let alone be able to hear it in a public place. But Shepard, she graduated from the N7 Program with high honours, she was taught to notice these things.

"Shepard, good to see you've made it," Miranda said with a weary smile as she walked up to Jane. She looked tired, stressed, more so than when she was serving aboard the _Normandy_. The Spectre also noted the missing Cerberus Insignia on Miranda's figure hugging garb. Shepard guessed that Miranda had gone off grid

"What can I do for you Miranda?" Jane asked.

Lawson gestured for Shepard to follow her into a skycab, she seemed jumpy, on edge. Miranda led the Spectre to a red cab, and got into the drive seat. Once the doors were safely shut, she pulled the car into the sky lanes over the Presidium.

"Shepard, I have a favour to ask," she sounded stressed, scared, "I need to have access to Alliance resources. I can't tell you why, but it's important."

The fear that was clearly etched into Miranda's face was certainly not due to Shepard's larger size. It was concern; Jane guessed it had something to do with Oriana, Miranda's sister. She knew how fiercely protective Miranda became when it concerned Oriana, and she understood too.

"It's yours," Jane said without hesitation. She lifted her Omni-tool and entered a few commands before switching it off again.

"Thank you, Jane," Miranda smiled in relief, "for everything."

"Any time," Jane reassured softly. "Take care, okay?"

"No promises," Miranda replied with equal measure.

The car docked back onto the bay, allowing Jane to get off. Out of habit, she decided to watch Miranda's car until it was far out of sight. Jane hoped that Miranda would make it through okay, both of them had endured far more than most could claim.

Except for John, Shepard thought. She had lost a lot of good people in the past few years. They felt like eons apart, but at the same time, just a few days. Ash, Chakwas, Kelly, Kaidan, Ethan, Mark, Emily, she'd lost so many people, and now it was getting to her.

That's the dreaded effect of downtime, the subconscious mourning of those fallen.

Pulling away from the hand railings, Jane walked across the passenger lounge, past the security checkpoint and into the elevator. She felt the pull of the elevator, it was faint, but it was there nonetheless. She hadn't felt the acceleration before, but feeling it now, it served as a reminder to how empty the platform was. Jane certainly did miss the idle chit-chat amongst members of her squad.

The doors parted open, revealing the bustling crowd trying to make their way through the maze of bureaucracy. Even though the tide of war had turned, there were still countless people fleeing to the Citadel. Shepard had to remind herself that these were the people that made it out of Reaper held systems. She knew firsthand how effective the Reapers were, their ability to overwhelm a stronghold was unbelievable.

She pushed her way through the crowded onto the staircase that lead to the offices, flanked by armed guards. She quickly gave the turian and human C-Sec officer a reassuring smile and nod, before going into the Spectre offices. As she let the security scanners wave over her, she noticed that no one had yet to move into Udina's office. Apparently C-Sec was still sweeping it.

Hissing quietly open, Shepard walked into the long deep blue hallway adorned with monitors, displaying information that was near useless to her. Most of the showed the casualty rates every territory was suffering. The Terminus Systems being the worst hit. So much so, that Council Forces were practically blind beyond the Attican Traverse. Jane guessed that her best source of information for whatever was happening in the lawless systems would be from both Aria T'Loak or Liara T'Soni.

Not being racist or anythingâ€¦| but why is it mostly asari being the head of illegal organisations? She pondered.

"Spectre status recognised," the disembodied male voice said.

No shit, Jane sighed, _how else would I have gotten in?_

A few moments later, she frowned and realised that she was going through the aftermath stages of stressful events. With the Coalition helping her workload, there was a lot of energy left unfocused. She understood why Cortez wasn't a big fan of downtime.

Shepard walked towards the intel console, and looked at her messages. There was one from Wrex asking her to aid Aralakh Company investigating possible Rachni activity in the Attican Traverse, and there was another report regarding a possible Quarian-Geth War underway. However there weren't enough resources to confirm this. But Jane considered her past observations of the Quarian people, the Admiralty in particular, and came to a conclusion that a war would be likely.

They're like whiny kids, Jane cursed. She understood the Quarrians' plight, but she couldn't help but offer them little sympathy. They're blind arrogance and short-sighted behaviour was going to cost the galaxy so much.

People often saw Jane as a diplomat and a guardian angel, which was in part true. Few have ever seen her take a hardliner stance, mainly it was because she was willing to "compromise before it reached her interests", meaning that she always got what she wanted, and then some, while giving the impression to others that she had to sacrifice a great deal. But if everything boiled down and all hands were shown, Jane would not hesitate to pull the trigger to protect those she cared deeply about.

Bringing up the galactic map on the display to the console's left; Shepard could see how the war was progressing. The Coalition had managed to make a safe zone within a large portion of Systems Alliance Space and Inner Council Space. Jane keyed in a few commands to tag locations of her objectives. The message console flashed again, prompting her to open the message. It was from Aria who was residing at Purgatory Bar on the Citadel. Shepard was well aware that the Queen of Omega had been ousted and planned to reclaim what was once hers.

Jane was no shrink, but years of experience allowed her to read people like a book. She could tell that the loss of Omega was a personal blow to Aria, and that the Asari wanted blood. Of course right now, there were far more important things to tend to, than retaking Omega. The message effectively told Shepard to meet Aria at docking bay 42 when she got the chance.

Giving a long yawn, followed by rubbing her eyes, Shepard walked back out and into the foyer, it was time to head back to the _Normandy_ for another recap.

â€|

Returning to the _Normandy_, John headed up towards the private lounge. John had just received a memo from Keyes, it was marked urgent. Thane had already departed to catch up with Garrus, the Drell was going to say hello to Shepard later. He had the uncanny ability to know whether people were busy or not.

The lounge doors parted open, allowing John's shoes to click upon the timber floor, and dampen over the carpet sections. He found everyone to be waiting for him. Palmer and Shepard sat at a couch near the window. John could sense their unease, they had their shoulders hunched forward, and fidgeting with their fingers.

Keyes gestured for John to stand next to him. Reading off everybody's body language, the Spartan could guess what was happening. They were going to call all ONISAD Teams ranging from First to Twelfth. The main cadre were within the COM's view range, while Jane and Sarah weren't, probably for the best too.

Arca and Lotus walked into the centre of the group, they were still in their suits, but with their sleeves rolled up and their ties loosened. Arca entered a few commands into his tacpad, and interfaced with the _Normandy_'s communications.

A bell chimed, and a few holographic figures winked into existence. They were all people that Arca and Lotus were familiar with. Most of them were from ONISAD-SOG (Special Operations Group) and three were from ONISAD-PAG (Political Action Group). Sarah wasn't too sure which Section ONISAD fell under, they collected intelligence like Section

I, but carried out clandestine operations like Section III. It would explain why Keyes was still close to the Operatives on a personal level. She wondered if ONISAD were one separate entity.

"Clarence," a man said to Arca. Like all ONISAD-SOG Operatives, they all looked the same age. He had black hair, dark brown eyes and a slim face.

"I'm not Clarence," Arca said, he would've added 'not anymore', but everyone knew the gist of what he was saying. All ONISAD Operatives constantly rotated through a list of assigned names. It made her wonder if she was going to get a cover name of sorts.

"So what's our next moves?" asked another, it was Sandman. All of ONISAD was on the same page; they had all received the kill order on Sixth Element. No one was comfortable with carrying it through, since it was ordered by Parangosky.

"See if we can get Sixth on the line," Lotus answered, stepping forward.

"What do we get by accomplishing that?" asked another, it was Bishop.

The avatars shifted and looked at each other, before returning their focus back to Fifth. Arca decided to be blunt. "All of us took part in that investigation, both SOGs and PAGs. We all know what Parangosky is capable of."

The members looked at each other, hearing Parangosky's name made their skin crawl and blood boil. They too had to sacrifice so much at her orders. No one in ONISAD was loyal to her, save for a few PAGs and newcomers, but even then, that loyalty didn't stretch far.

"I think we stopped following orders to the letter a long time ago," Sandman said, rubbing his chin.

â€|

The meeting wasâ€| unnerving to say the least, even though Jane didn't partake in it, seeing the unspoken weariness of ONISAD Operatives was disturbing. They all sounded so tired of what they were doing, but they had no other alternative. Shepard compared their situation to rampancy in UNSC 26th Century Smart AIs. Knowledge and war is like a drug, stepping into the darkness to find refuge from the blinding light of ignorance. Shepard knew could tell that John understood these people. He had worked alongside them on numerous occasions; he had to know what they were going through.

Jane decided to walk out of the private lounge and down onto the crew deck where the atmosphere was livelier. Liara was talking to Engineer Donnelly and Daniels before heading back into the kitchen. Shepard certainly liked how bigger her ship was now.

"Shepard, can I talk to you in private?" Liara asked, gesturing to her office.

Jane nodded. Her golden insignia glistened on her officer's garb as she walked under the fluorescent light, and towards the Asari's office. Upon entering, she noticed that an old classical orchestral

piece was playing; it had a nice soft melody to it, and a whirl accompaniment. Shepard never recalled Liara listening to this type of music before.

"So, what is it you want to talk about?" Jane asked as she rested her hip on the railing in front of the wall mounted monitors.

A worried expression spread across Liara's face. "My agents have detected massive troop movements in the Terminus Systems all of them are converging on Omega and Bindur."

'Troops', the key word was 'troops'. Shepard frowned and unfolded her arms before walking to the main console. "Cerberus?"

"Possibly," Liara replied, "but the readings from the ship indicate something more advanced than mercenary groups or what we know Cerberus has access to."

Jane smiled inwardly, even though Liara started out as an archaeologist, she had the ability to deduce the most complex of things, and in this case, she suspected that there was a Fifth Column in the UNSC.

"What's your take on it?" Shepard asked.

Around this time, Keyes entered the room, unannounced. He didn't even knock. Jane knew that he was a person who always knocked on the door, and that Liara was the type of person who would like to hear a doorknock first, before someone enter.

The Asari scientist gave a small smile towards the towering Doctor before handing him a tablet containing the relevant information. "Massive movements of resources and troops into Omega and Bindur."

Shepard frowned.

****XXxxXX****

"_Hood, my main concern is about the war. Keyes has sent me some disturbing information regarding Parangosky."

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

"_We need to confirm that she's a fifth column before we act. We can't risk ONI having an internal war. Section Zero is still recovering. But if it comes down to it, I'll have Keyes replace her."

>_**-Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood**_

"_But he's a Lieutenant Colonel."

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

"_There's been talk of promoting him, a bit unorthodox, but since when we the last time ONI did something conventional?"

>_**-Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: I do apologise for the tardiness, but I was very wrapped up in**

ME3.**

41. Purge of Rannoch

A/N: I'm going to cut to the chase of the storyâ€|

XXxxXX

"_The water has risen, the floodgates have opened, but none shall know that the grave shall sing victory everlasting. Be swift and silent."

>_**-Gravemind**_

XXxxXX

ABOARD **_NEEMA**_**, IN HIGH ORBIT OF RANNOCH, PERSEUS VEIL**

Hundreds of geth and quarian ships clashed in a savage battle over Rannoch. Angry streaks of red slugs and streams of plasma streaked through the abyss and smashed into opposing vessels. Clearly outmatched, the quarian ships were being torn asunder by the geth.

One geth frigate overloaded a quarian ship's shields before blowing through it, guns blazing. Hull sections were reduced to molten slag and spat out into space. Geth fighters began to pour out of their carriers and fly towards the quarian formation.

Admiral Han Gerrel sat in his command seat, hands clasped. The Geth Dreadnought was massive, it's sheer size and firepower alone made itself a formidable match for the _Destiny Ascension_. Thus, it gutted quarian ships from stem to stern with relative ease.

The _Demov_ was unfortunate to be caught in the Dreadnought's main guns. By the time the quarian crew had registered their fate, a heavy slug tore through space and punched a hole through the defences, and overloading the reactor core. A brilliant ball of orange fire consumed the ship before spewing out red hot debris and slag.

"We've lost another one," said an ensign.

"Concentrate all fire at the Dreadnought!" Gerrel ordered.

The message was relayed, and all available ships unleashed a salvo of rounds, but the slugs impacted harmlessly across the Dreadnought's kinetic barriers.

"Admiral, detecting massive energy signatures behind the geth fleet!" said a crewman.

Han felt defeat gripping at his heart, there was no way the Heavy Fleet could contend with reinforcements. The geth had them outgunned; outnumbered and outmatched, reinforcements just meant overkill. Moving towards the display, the Admiral could see a blossom of light blue energy span out behind the Dreadnought.

Out of the blackness of the blue blossom was a ship, far bigger than

the Dreadnought. It's hull was a reflective silver, adorned with purple, it's midsection was bulbous and curvaceous. It was a design similar to the geth, but at the same time, far more alien. Geth were not renowned for their aesthetic tastes, they were utilitarians. The ship that had just appeared, seemedâ€¦ religious.

It ploughed through the Geth Dreadnought with ease that Han saw the shields of both ships flared, but only one winked out of existence. The Geth ship snapped cleanly in half, the lack of atmosphere inside meant that the wreckage wouldn't spin aimlessly or be consumed in fire. Instead, the debris just glowed red hot from the thermodynamic release of energy.

A sense of relief washed over Han, but the euphoric feeling crashed immediately when the unknown ship began to open fire. More of those ships appeared in a similar fashion, existing from some kind of portal. Most were smaller than the first ship, some were the same classification, but one stood out to beâ€¦ bigger. Definitely the largest ship Han had seen. It alone could lay waste to the entire Turian Fleet.

The Admiral bowed his head down in defeat. Bolts of plasma streaked across space and burned through the quarian ships with incredible ease.

"Boarding parties inbound!" a crewman yelled.

A purple dropship glided towards the _Neema_. It crashed through the Command Deck, and sealed up the puncture with an energy field. Han had been lucky enough to be standing far away. He and his surviving crew drew their weapons as they got out of their seats and aimed them at the opening hatch. But instead of soldier's marching out, a fine olive green mist entered the bridge.

****XXxXX****

****ABOARD SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_**,**__**APPROACHING RANNOCH, TIKKUN, PERSEUS VEIL****

John had to marvel at Keyes's ingenuity, being the head of Section III, meant that Essingdon had some pull over ONISAD. Thus he had sent the available Tenth Element to help out Grunt and Aralakh Company, this obviously freed up Shepard's schedule, and so the cadre were headed towards Rannoch. John never harboured any hard feelings towards the Quarians, he had seen too much. But he did however; understand Shepard's general weariness of the species. Though the Commander had welcomed Tali Zorah and Xen aboard with open arms, so that was something.

"What do we have coming from the COM buoys?" Shepard asked, placing a hand on Joker's chair.

"Nothing Commander," the Flight Lieutenant answered.

EDI turned to face Shepard, whilst in her seat. "I do not detect any signatures."

That usually meant the worst possible scenario. _Divinus_ and _Normandy_ dropped out of slipspace, but instead of a raging battle, only a silent grave was greeting them. Thousands if not millions of

debris, both quarian and geth, floated aimlessly. Hull sections still glowed red hot, indicating that the battle had been ended abruptly. In the centre of whatever was left of the geth formation, was the dreadnought's shattered remains. But according to the size of both factions, there should've been more wreckage.

"No," Tali sobbed, quietly. A deathly chill had crept over the crew as the image of Rannoch flooded the viewscreens.

"Just dust and echos," Cortana whispered. She had come over onto the Normandy during Thorne's transfer; her near-lifelike hard light body had garnered a lot of attention.

"It's been glassed," John said quietly. His armour clanked softly as he turned to the fully geared up Shepard.

"But how?" Jane was still in shock. Seeing something burning and maimed always has more impact than seeing something burnt or obliterated. Rannoch was burning, firestorms raged across its spare forests, while its deserts had been reduced o blackened glass and rivers of lava. Not a single drop of water was left on the planet.

"It's all gone," Tali sobbed.

Jane quickly enveloped the quarian in a sisterly hug. Screw the regs, she thought. Even after all Tali had been through, she still had that streak of innocence in her.

"Come on, you don't need to see this," Shepard cooed.

The quarian nodded lightly as Shepard let her go, and was led towards the private lounge by Liara. John could tell that it gutted Jane not being able to comfort her friend, but sadly this was something that couldn't wait.

"I will go tell the Migrant Fleet what has happened," Xen said. Her voice was on the verge of breaking, and it looked like she couldn't stand any longer.

"I'm so sorry," Jane said, offering condolences.

"As am I," Xen sighed before walking away.

There was an eerie feeling in the air, as if some kind of door had been bolted shut. The quarians had lost their homeworld.

"Any idea on who could've done this?" Keyes asked. John could tell the scientist had already formulated a few ideas.

Cortana shook her head, her hair swayed around her. "Nothing solid. I don't think it's a known entity."

Shepard bowed her head in exhausted defeat and confusion. "EDI, plot a course back to the Citadel."

"Yes Commander," the AI replied.

Shepard shot John a looking, saying that she needed to be somewhere. Understanding why, he gave a slight nod, and unofficially taking

command.

â€|**.**

Jane entered the armour bay and walked over to a spare table. She detached the armour plates from her body suit and placed it onto the dark grey metal surface, before heading to the private lounge. Fifth Element, was holed up in the observation deck, as soon as they had exited, Thorne snapped a crisp salute.

"Commander," he said politely.

Lotus gave the man a quick nudge into the stomach, which could be translated to, 'we're not military'. Shepard gave a quick nod before entering the elevator and punched in the floor she wanted to go to. The door hissed shut as she leaned against the wall and leaned back her head. Seeing Rannoch burning troubled her. It was like a message saying that she had failed. She knew she wasn't to blame, but still, it felt like that it was her fault.

The elevator doors opened again, and the bell chimed. Shepard was greeted by dimmed lights of the hallway. Upon entering the private lounge, she found Traynor trying to comfort Tali. Jane sat down on the couch next to the quarian.

"Dammit," Tali sobbed. Being unable to wipe away her tears, they coursed down her cheeks and splashed onto her visor.

"I'm so sorry," Jane said sadly, wrapping her arms around the young Quarian.

"What happens now? Our homeworld is goneâ€| Rannoch is gone," Tali said, barely above a whisper.

Shepard didn't have an answer to that, she wasn't even too sure if she knew what had happened to Rannoch. Her Omni-tool chimed, indicating that she had received a message. Quickly opening it, she saw that it was from Admiral Hackett.

â€|

_**From: **__Admiral Steve Hackette
>_**To: **__Commander Jane Shepard_

Commander, the Crucible is ready. We're going to go with our first guess that the Catalyst is the Citadel. For all intents and purposes, I think you should be there.

â€|

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"_When I was doing the investigation, I was actually surprised to see that Parangosky have a moral code. A fucked up one at that, or one that she is using to save face. I mean, c'mon, she hated flash cloning because of the trauma it puts the family through, but somehow, nearly a thousand dead war orphans is not as bad."

>_**-Arca**_

"_That bitch is good at cleaning her tracks, High Command haven't gotten sufficient evidence to have her removed."

>_**-Operations Manager Edmund Flint**_

XXxxXX

A/N: To the anonymous reviewer who flamed my ass, I'll admit, that did hurt until I analysed what you said. Now, I'm left confused, not hurt but really confused.

So you're slamming the original Mass Effect Universe, (to which I reply "what are you even doing in this fandom if you hate it?" â€" that's the gist I'm getting from you anyway).

You said that I failed to get the lore right, I have to ask, what part? It doesn't help that you make a statement as such, and not provide evidence. If you're pinning me for my inconsistency with Shepard's image, that's a bit of a lame cop out (no one noticed it until I pointed it out â€" or they didn't bother to mention it).

Next is that you're saying the writing quality has slowly diminished, I beg to differ. However if you're referring to plot, that's your subjective opinion.

Finally, you tell everyone to stop reading this story. Okay thenâ€" I really don't have a reply to that without being offensive so I'll just hold onto what I have to say.

In summary, your review has left me more or less confused. If I have done something wrong, I would like to know what it is **exactly**** so that I may rectify it. And please be specific and structural in what you have to say.**

â€"

Quick sidenote to all the readers, thank you for those who've given me support. It would be greatly appreciated if the anonymous reviewers made themselves somewhat identifiable so that I can keep track of your individual opinions; you don't need to create an account (unless you would like to have a private discussion).

â€"

Next update will be out soon, and please review. I know this chapter is short, but I like to do a chapter per topic, not chapter per x amount of words.

Thanks everybody.

42. Firing The Crucible

A/N: Hello again and Happy Holidays.

XXxxXX

"_Desperate times call for desperate measures. He gets the job."

>_**-Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, taking about LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Keyes**_

XXxxXX

ABOARD **_SSV NORMANDY SR-2, **_**IN HIGH ORBIT OF RANNOCH**

Keyes was playing Benedictus by Karl Jenkins over the ship's intercom to calm down everyone's nerves. Jane wasn't a huge fan of classical music; her preferences leaned towards Epic Ensembles and Celtic. Nonetheless, she quite liked the piece. At the request of Tali, Normandy and Divinus had remained at Rannoch just a bit longer. The young Quarian was still having trouble accepting the fact that Rannoch was now a ball of glass.

That being said, the Migrant Fleet was still fully capable of defending itself, only a few hundred ships were in the heavy fleet, unfortunately all of them had perished. Cortana and EDI still voiced their concerns about the lack of wreckage floating about.

"Commander," Cortana turned around and greeted, as the Spectre exited the elevator and into the CIC.

"Cortana, Chief," Shepard replied. She always addressed the Spartan by his "title" while they were in public. Jane knew that first names for Spartans were a very private thing.

"Shepard," John gave a light bow.

Jane walked up to the central tactable and leaned on the side bench. She looked at the 3D holographic projection of Rannoch and the surrounding debris.

"All though there is a 'lack' of debris," the Smart AI said while bringing up her hands to do a quotation gesture. "There's still a lot to track and scan. But from what EDI and I have found, geth ships having been destroyed by plasma weapons."

Shepard placed a hand on her chin and asked, "friendly fire?"

Cortana shook her head.

"Unlikely," EDI interjected, "Geth targeting software and battle tactics effectively prevents them from firing on one another."

"Could be another entity," John said. Unlike Shepard, he hadn't bothered to get out of his armour.

Jane heard the elevator doors part open behind her as Donnie and Liara came over to join them. They had stern expressions on their faces, indicating that they were hypothesising on what had happened.

"Liara," Shepard began, "you said that you're agents had tracked massive movements of troops and resources through the Terminus

Systems. Do you think this was done by them?"

The Asari gave Keyes a quick glance before returning her attention back to Shepard. "It is possible."

"But doubtful," Essingdon added, "Perseus Veil is a bit outside of their way. No strategic value according to your reports."

Jane mulled over the statement. Rannoch was well out of anyone's way, and it had little resources left. It was frustrating trying to find a motive to Rannoch being glassed. Had the _Normandy_ and _Divinus_ just stumble onto naval wreckage, they would've passed it up as a massive slug fest where the winner had already departed. Though usually the winning fleet would hang around to salvage whatever they could. The geth weren't known to letting things go to waste.

Wreckage dispersal patterns had indicated that several ships on both sides had been rammed from one direction.

Cortana looked like as if she was going to say something, but she stopped, and turned to face the holographic display. With a half dozen of hand gestures, the AI had brought the remains of what was identified as the Geth Dreadnought, to the centre of attention.

"Scanners are picking something up," EDI said.

"I'm getting the same feed from _Divinus_," Cortana added. "Enlarging image."

The display centred into the wreckage of the Dreadnought's midsection, which was coloured in red, signifying how hot the area was. It would explain why the scanners didn't pick anything up there in the first place, too much interference. There was a geth survivor, but not just any survivor. The image cleared up and revealed a geth platform with a large gaping hole in its torso, roughly covered by N7 armour it wore.

"Legion," Shepard breathed.

"I'm assuming you two know each other?" Cortana joked. Of course she already knew that Legion and Shepard had crossed paths before.

"Joker, are you getting this?" Shepard asked over the COM.

"Yes Commander."

"Let's go pick him up then."

****XXxxxXX****

****OMEGA, TERMINUS SYSTEMS****

General Oleg Petrovsky paced back and forth in his makeshift office inside the afterlife bar. Things had gotten considerably easier since Aegis Defence Contracts had arrived; their drones had proven extremely effective in pacifying any resistance. Mechs left behind by Eclipse Mercs had been retrofitted to higher standards.

Still, Petrovsky had his orders, and so, he would minimise ADC's involvement much as possible. ADC had many subsidiaries, ran by different people. Officially, they were one conglomerate, unofficially; they were dozens of entities under the one name.

The Division that Petrovsky had been sent, was the one operating in the redzones, and most of them had been raised their too, which mean that they had a deep hatred for the Coalition. Well-armed, well-trained operators who hated his backgroundâ€¦ a volatile mix, but one that would work extremely well if done correctly.

Walking towards his desk, he moved another one of his chess pieces under the deep red light. He hated red lights; they reminded him of the interrogation rooms during the Arcani program.

"Petrovsky!" a heavily armoured figure called out. It was Serin Osman, and her Spartan-IV team, Bravo-Kilo. Whatever military discipline they had within them had evaporated a long time ago. They were essentially rogue, loose cannons, all in Parangosky's palm. Oleg hated them with every fibre of his being.

They walked into Afterlife's main area with an arrogant swagger, apparently bored. Oleg sighed, and straightened out his white Cerberus suit as he walked down the stairs to address them.

"If you're bored, why don't you go down to the lower levels, the Talons have been causing us some grief there," Petrovsky said with a stern voice, he had to reign them in.

Familiar with Oleg's ingenuity and perception, the team agreed with what he had to say, and departed immediately. He wished he had a team of experienced ONISAD Operatives were with him but First through to 12th Element were all busy, and he doubted that none of them would want to be wrapped up with Cerberus after a kill order had been placed on Sixth Element.

Petrovsky hypothesised that someone in the first twelve elements would've figured out something that implicated Sixth Element's involvement with Cerberus. Couple that with past apprehensive stances towards Parangosky, it was clear that First to 12th Element were no longer loyal to the Ice Queen.

Hearing the bell chime on his computer again, Oleg sighed as he had to attend to another problem.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**MAJESTIC, **_**IN ORBIT OF THE CITADEL, SERPENT NEBULA****

Standing on a port observation deck, Lasky watched the Crucible be towed towards the Citadel. UNSC Scientist had managed to fully decrypt and understand the science behind the Prothean creation.

"ETA five minutes sir," a crewman said.

Lasky gave a quick nod in acknowledgement. First Fleet and Second Fleet formed a defensive perimeter around the Citadel, while the

Fifth Fleet surrounded the relay.

The Crucible was guided into place by the Logistical Fleet, as a precaution, the Citadel had already been evacuated, and the surrounding habitats moved away.

Gazing at the glowing nebula, Lasky followed the Crucible's movements. The orb shaped construct shed its protective grey hulls, revealing the actual device. With its arms outstretched, it latched onto the Presidium. From certain angles, the Citadel looked like a straight tooth dagger.

"Thirteenth Element is en route to the Citadel, sir," Preston said over the intercom.

"Has Commander Shepard arrived yet?"

"Yes sir, she's with Admiral Anderson, they're two minutes away from the Presidium," the AI responded.

Tom walked across the metal deck while running his hand along a glazed glass counter. He felt like he should be feeling a sense of relief, but instead he felt it was just the beginning. Like this conflict had yet to enter full swing.

â€|

****CITADEL CENTRAL HUB****

Standing guard around the main entrance, John watched the silent battle between Fifth and Thirteenth Element; they were sizing each other up. Well, Thorne and Palmer weren't partaking in it since they were new.

"Hold your fire, we're coming out," Anderson said over the COM, there was a hint of annoyance in his voice.

The UNSC soldiers lowered their weapons as the massive doors parted open. Admiral Anderson and an entourage of the Galaxy's best soldier's walked out with him. He turned to face Shepard who had her helmet folded away. He gave her a look that asked her to give his condolences to Tali about the purge of Rannoch.

"There's an AI inside," he said, "it or he wants to talk to you and you alone. Says the Crucible won't be fired until you meet him."

Shepard bowed her head and frowned, she had a gut feeling that it would be some kind of trap. She turned to John to get some kind of hint or message, the gentle nod he gave was a sign to say that it was her choice.

"AI?" Jane inquired.

"Disembodied adult male as far as I can tell," Anderson replied.

"I guess it is an entity that controls the Reapers," Cortana suggested.

The galaxy was still uncomfortable with AI running around unshackled,

to see one inhabiting a lifelike hard-light body unnerved a lot of the experienced N7 Marines and Asari Commandos. John could tell that from the way they moved and how they shifted their weight from one leg to the other, uneasily.

"I'm going in," Shepard said, coming to a decision.

"Good luck in there, Shepard," Anderson said.

Jane slowly walked through the gateway her eyes took in every detail of her surroundings. The cavernous surroundings were a stark contrast to the light blue metal waiting area that she was in before. She walked down the stair case and onto a catwalk that stretched over a sea of vertical panels rotating with electricity sparking across them; it reminded her of the Shadow Broker's base. Remembering the tri-jawed creature sent chills down her spine.

Making across to the other side, Shepard walked up the staircase lit by blue lights; her footfalls became increasingly louder as she quickened her pace. Arriving at the central control room, Jane stood in the centre of the red lit room with grey floors, overlooking the Citadel Wards, the Serpent Nebula and the surrounding fleets.

There was something strange about this place, something ancient about it. Technological advancement and age is something that is definitely mutually exclusive. From the corner of her eye, Jane could see a silvery light take shape. It was in the form of an infant boy, wearing sports shoes, jeans and a hoodie. Everything about him, reminded her of that child killed on Earth by the Reapers.

Her heart twinged at the sight of the avatar, it was a clear representation of the Reaper's ability to know of people's greatest fears and regrets.

"Hello Shepard," he said innocently. His voice was like the amalgamation of three people, a man, a woman and a boy.

"Hello," Jane said warily, she shifted her stance and hovered her hand over her sidearm.

"I am the Catalyst," he said as he walked towards her, ignoring her hostile stance.

"Do you control the Reapers?"

The boy nodded. "It is my purpose."

Jane eyed the avatar as if she was given the most twisted answer in existence. She had so many questions to ask, but none of them outweighed her desire to end the war. Already the Reapers had claimed billions of lives in this cycle.

"Follow me," the Catalyst commanded as he or it walked onto an elevated platform.

Shepard stepped onto the panel while keep her eyes glued to the AI. "Why are you wiping us out? Or trying to at least."

The elevator hummed quietly as it lifted off from the chamber and towards the upper levels.

"We have done this for longer than you can imagine," the AI answered, turning to face the Spectre. "It is our solution to control the chaos of organics."

"How?" Shepard asked incredulously. _How the fuck is mass genocide a solution?_

"Synthetics will always surpass organics, an inevitable war will come, causing synthetics to wipe out all organic life," the boy replied. "By harvesting you, we preserve you in Reaper form."

"But the Coalitionâ€¦" Jane supplied.

"The Coalition's ability to live harmoniously with synthetics, and the fact that you're standing here has shown that a new solution is required."

The fuck? Jane's mind screamed. _You've got to be fucking kidding me, I can see so many logical errors here._

"What do you have in mind," Shepard asked threateningly. When her mind came to terms with what the Catalyst had replied, it was like stupidity beyond all measure. Absolute subjugation and destruction of sentient souls in order to preserve them? A gestalt conscience that no longer bore any resemblance from what it was created from? It was unfathomable and stupid beyond all measure. The Reapers had failed to understand what they preserved. They only preserved the genetic material and knowledge, but the soul they destroyed. The soul and the culture, the true markers of a species, they destroyed it all.

Unfucking-believable.

"Well, that's just stupid," Cortana commented through the COMs, Shepard guessed that John had told that AI to keep an eye out for her.

"I agree," Shepard whispered into the mic.

The platform came to a halt in a larger chamber. It had a complete 360 view of the Wards and the Nebula. The platforms were aligned in a tetrahedral shape. The catwalk Shepard was currently standing on stretched before her and split into three forks. The left catwalk lead to what appeared to be a blue glowing console, the right one led to a reactor core that glowed red, and the central catwalk stretched towards a core lance of glowing energy.

"This is my new solution," the Catalyst gestured towards the three points of interest. Jane tilted her head quizzically. She was about to ask another question when the avatar began to flicker.

"Y-y-y-y-you h-h-h-h-have to sel-sel-sel-ectâ€¦|
ch-choseâ€¦|"

Shepard's eyes widened, she took a step back. Out of the corner of her eyes she could see the first chamber below her. She saw a deformed being lurch across the red ground, it looked like a parody of a turian.

"Oh shit," Cortana muttered. "We're coming in!"

The Citadel rumbled as the Wards began to split apart and the superstructure opened like a flower. The central pillar of energy pulsed green as a fine olive mist entered the area.

Shit!

Jane quickly engaged her helmet; the plates slid out of their compartments and formed a protective seal around her head. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the HUD, and were quickly assaulted by a multitude of information.

She looked back at the avatar only to realise that the Catalyst was no longer there. The energy pillar began to expand, the coils wrapped around the pylon vibrated. Jane looked up into the overhead view panel, and saw a green lance of energy lash out at the Relay. The Mass Effect Relay Node Element Zero Core began to spin rapidly and pulse green before discharging. The sheer power that coursed through it tore the core apart, rendering the node ineffective.

Jane had no idea what this meant, but right now, she knew she had to run. Beings began to drop down onto the catwalks or crawl onto the walkways. Shepard recognised them as the pure form. She quickly drew her sword and slashed vertically across, generating a powerful biotic shockwave that the forms of the catwalk.

She jumped off the blue walkway and used her suits gravity manipulators and thrusters to land safely on the chamber below. A combat form tried to jump her, but she was faster, and grabbed its forearms. The assimilated creature howled in pain as Jane crushed its bones before using her biotics to hurl it across the room and onto the hard light panel. She could hear a sickening squelch as it's rib cage caved in.

More forms began to seep out of who-knows-where. Shepard created multiple singularities to create some form of protective barrier. The Flood forms danced back and forth before rushing towards her; however, the lack of gravity caused them to dangle helplessly in mid-air. Jane used the opportunity to unleash a powerful shockwave attack. The explosive wave of blue energy washed over the hapless forms, creating a powerful biotic explosion. Shepard stumbled back from the sheer force while showered in sickly green gore. She was thankful that her energy shields were in place as the sludge was quickly shed off her.

Pulling herself back up, Jane drew a M7DEW Hard-light SMG and fired it into the horde as she backtracked the way she came through. Shepard used every biotic trick in the textbook. She created an annihilation field around her, and concentrated on what life signature she wanted to target. It helped neutralise the smaller, fragile fleshier bastards. Every few seconds Shepard would slam the ground with a biotic fist, generating a circular shockwave that hurled back any combat form that got too close.

She quickly fell into a rhythm of fending off the horde. Shepard would create a few singularity points while using Dark-Channel to great effect - it was the step up of warp. Then, she would create a powerful throwing field or shockwave to initiate a catalytic

explosive biotic effect. Green smears of sickly flesh trailed her wake as she retreated to the entrance.

"Shepard, status!" it was John, he sounded sincerely concerned.

"I'm fine Chief," Jane reassured, "though if you can get here soon, that would be nice."

"What's going on?"

"Flood!" Shepard screamed.

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Did you really think I would kill off Legion? C'mon, I'm not a Quarian Sympathiser.****

****Anyway, please review.****

43. Containment

****A/N: Hello again****

****XXxxXX****

"_M94A1 Automatic Tactical Shotgun, tough, reliable ad universal. It is unrivalled in stopping power and can fire a wide range of munitions ranging from hard-light to ballistics. It combines the abilities of the Scattershots and the M93 series."

>_**-M94A1 Shotgun**_

****XXxxXX****

****PRESIDIUM â€" CENTRAL CONTROL HUB, CITADEL, SERPENT NEBULA****

"Cortana, get this door open!" the Spartan barked.

The AI complied with a nod and pressed her hard-light hands onto the nearby panel. A quick override command allowed Cortana remote control over the system. Satisfied that the task was done, she removed her hand.

"Opening in three. I'll wait here and keep the door open."

John gave a curt nod of thanks and turned to Anderson. "Stay here and cover us."

"You got it Chief," the Admiral said, drawing a Predator pistol.

When the massive doors parted, John took the lead and pushed into the room. The moment everyone heard Shepard scream Flood over the COMs, they instantly switched to their most effective weapon at combating the parasite.

The Chief fire a quick burst from his Sabre, shredding a cluster of infectious forms. They popped like balloons the moment their skin was pierced, showering the area with sickly flesh. The Spartan noted the

fact that the parasite had green glowing patterns across their bodies. John gestured towards the group to fan out. Palmer and Thorne moved up to the left, hosing a pure combat form with their Sabres. Arca and Lotus diverged to the right and shredded a cluster of Flood forms with their shotguns. Lotus was using Canister-Catalyst Ammunition which was terrifyingly effective against the lightly armoured pure forms. The parasites struggled under the firepower before crumbling to ash. Arca was using Slug-Catalyst rounds, the large bullets simply drilled its way through the horde, turning the armoured forms into ash, whilst leaving their armour warped and melted.

Rook and Wizard advanced up to the Chief and Shepard's position, with their SAWs, they provided a constant stream of fire that kept the ranged forms from harassing their position.

Soon the air was filled with the smell of ozone, the thunderous roar of gunfire and the stench of burning flesh. John was silently thankful that his suit had ox-rebreathers, or else he would have to gag on the horrid smell.

"Sitrep!" came Anderson's voice over the COM.

"Parasitic contact!" Shepard replied.

The team slowly retreated back to the doors. Regardless of how many forms fell, more kept on coming. Their deafening animalistic growls competed against the roar of guns for dominance.

"Contact right!" Arca yelled

John spun round to see a massive Flood form he had only seen in the archives, the Behemoth. It was the size of a megalodon. 20m in length and 5m in height, it was sported on six legs, two powerful hind legs, and four front legs. The Behemoth's skin was a pale sickly green, blotched with fleshy tendrils, spewing out spores, but its flesh was well toned with muscles.

The form roared while shaking its maw back and forth like a lion. The Spartan instantly fired into its mouth, searing its flesh. Blossoms of gold along its body showed that Catalytic munitions were having little effect. The ammunitions' energy was absorbed into the dense parasitic flesh. Mounted on its back was an autocannon, widespread in the galaxy's use against the Reapers.

"They're getting too close for comfort," Palmer gritted. Expending all her rifle's ammunition, she switched to her dual pistols and aimed on removing the infections forms. She took out clusters at a time whenever she pulled the trigger; spent shells arced into the air, leaving a trail of smoke as the clattered onto the floor. A burst from the Behemoth's guns hit Palmer squarely in the chest, causing her shield's to flare.

"I have an idea," said Thorne. He slung his rifle onto his back, and withdrew his sword. "Cover me."

"Ah shit, not this again," Arca growled as he shifted his aim left.

Thorne charged towards the Behemoth, crushing a few infections forms

under his boot, and knocking aside a few combat forms. He staggered under the shockwave of an exploding carrier form. The Behemoth roared, and spun its gun around to bear. The heavy calibre bullets bit at the metal deck and crashed into Thorne's shields. He quickly barrel rolled to his right, avoiding another salvo.

The moment Thorne reached striking distance, the Behemoth leapt forward with the intent to crush him. But the Spartan-IV was faster; he quickly spun round and cleaved his plasma blade through the form's hind legs. Climbing up onto the stricken creature, Thorne rammed his blade down into the base of its skull. Without a word, without a cry, the Behemoth collapsed with a resounding thud onto the deck.

Turning around to face the turret mounted on the Flood Form's back, Thorne cut the weapon loose from its fleshy tendrils, and ripped it from the parasite's back. Thumbing for the trigger coved in sickly goo, Thorne unleashed a torrent of fire that blew the Flood force to pieces. The Spartan had to cycle through Thermal clips quickly, but at least he boosted available firepower.

Slowly, the group retreated back through the entrance and closed the doors. John saw Cortana having a concerned expression on her face, but it immediately softened when she saw that he was safe. Pulling her hand away from the console, another worried look spread across the AI's face.

"Chief, the Flood, they're infecting the Citadel's systems!"

"We can't let them take control of the Citadel," Anderson said, "because if they do, the Galaxy's Mass Relay's will be in their hands."

"A little sidenote," Cortana said in her mater-of-factly tone, "that green beam that was shot off earlier, that destroyed the Relays."

Keyes, who was forbidden to go into the room when Flood presence was alerted, joined in on the conversation. "It didn't do just that."

The scientist beckoned Liara to come forward. The sight they saw was something they never expected. Green tendrils of the most advanced mathematical formulae travelled up and down her being, her once blue eyes now glowed green.

"Oh my god," Anderson breathed as he pulled off his helmet. Looking into the reflection of his visor, he realised that there were green glowing patterns scrolling across his dark skin, and his eyes glowed just like the Asari.

In an instant, everyone took off their helmets, revealing their faces. John looked at Arca, and found that the man of Oriental descent did not have the distinct green glowing patterns across his face, instead he had blue pulses that travelled down from the top of his head. In fact, all of the UNSC personnel had that blue pulse.

Turning to face Shepard's unshielded face, John was surprised to see a myriad of blue and green running along her face. Her eyes now swirled like turquoise with green and blue swirling around contently.

"What the hell happened?" Anderson asked.

"Something not to discuss now," Keyes urged, pointing to a seeping cloud of Flood spores coming from the air vents.

Quickly doubling back through the way they came, the various parties departed on their transports. After the doors hissed shut, John felt the gee-forces push against him as Cortez throttled the Osprey out of the docking bay and into space. He looked around the hold to see the gaunt looks in the weary eyes. All of them had faced the nightmare of the Flood before, and none of them wanted to relive it. But seeing the parasite on the Citadel, it had struck a deep resonating chord in all of them.

"Incoming message from Admiral Lasky," Cortana said.

"Patch it through," John ordered.

"Chief?" Lasky's voice came through, "proceed to these coordinates, we need to make sure you're clean."

"Understood, sir."

Cortez gently steered the Osprey to a location between two Destroyers so that the dropship could be checked. A few sentinels floated by and performed a few scans. John assumed that the bird was clean as the drones pulled away.

"Sir," Cortana began, "the Flood, they're assimilating the Citadel's system."

The AI had left a few wireless markers that continually updated her on the station's mainframe status. With each second passing by, the network was becoming even more corrupted. John took a deep breath as he came to grips that the parasitic nightmare could now touch the digital realm.

"This was always bound to happen," Keyes muttered.

"Containment Protocols must be enacted," Lasky said sadly, "if they control the Citadel, they control the Relays, we cannot let them escape. Council and remaining galactic leaders have given us the all clear on this."

Though the Relays had been rendered inoperable when the Crucible fired, they could be easily repaired. And if the parasites managed to control the network, they would spread inexorably fast throughout the galaxy, faster than they could be contained.

The Chief gazed out of the viewport and could see Majestic's engine flare up, pushing the leviathan forward. He also saw Exultant Supremacy and assumed the Elites came the moment they heard of the Flood's presences.

"They're not doing what I'm thinking they're doing," Liara gasped.

Orbital habitats began to move further away from the infected station as the two massive ships came to bear.

"They're doing it," Jane said, watching the monitor.

John understood what was about to happen. In no way did he feel that it was overkill, especially if the Flood had attained the ability to assimilate the digital world.

Majestic's safety cannon plugs parted open, and in an instant, a blue lance of powerful energy streaked through the abyss and drill straight into the Citadel. The beam licked hungrily across Zakera Ward before burning across the Presidium. Chunks of red hot debris spun violently off the station, venting vital atmosphere to the Flood's existence.

With too much stress being put on the superstructure, the Citadel slowly tore itself apart. Lights began to sputter and wink off as the power lines were cut. _Exultant Supremacy_'s plasma turrets came online, collecting super dense plasma at the end of their coils. Bolts of savage energy arced from the bulbous ship and splashed onto the station, reducing the surface to molten slag.

John looked at Shepard and saw a troubled expression on her face. He knew she never really liked the station because of what it represented â€" inaction and ignorance â€" but the place did hold happy memories of her and her mother.

He then looked at Cortana to see a frustrated frown on her face. "Detecting small energy signatures, the Flood is escaping!"

Fighters and Interceptors began to deploy from the Coalition's Carriers. Broadwords and Claymores soared through space, all guns blazing. Beside them were the Elites in their Seraph fighters and Space-rated Banshees.

The Flood was only on shuttles, most of them didn't have any armaments, but they did have FTL Drives. The fighters were hard pressed to take out the transports before they made their jump. Alas, at least a dozen slipped through the cracks. Containment plans only worked best when a planet was being quarantined, not a space station. FTL jumps within close proximity of stations were easily accomplishable.

"Attention all UNSC Forces, I'm initiating Containment Protocol Alpha," Hood said over the public COM channels.

"Wellâ€¦ everything has gone to shit now," Shepard sighed, looking at the burning remains of the Citadel.

Combat Sentinels and UCAD Drones surged from their vessels and towards the Citadel to commence final mop-up operations. It reminded John of the destruction of Alpha Halo. Huge chunks of the Wards burning debris, floating listlessly with no purpose, and smaller pieces still rotating rapidly. Everything had been melted to the extent that it was impossible to identify what part of the station it used to be accurately.

John used the suit's enhanced optics to follow the formations of Drones. Some of them opened fire, their cobalt lances burning away any Flood biomass that survived the glassing.

So it beginsâ€|

"Cortez, take us back to _Majestic_, " Shepard ordered. And with a sigh, she slumped into a chair, overwhelmed by the fact that the Flood threat was real. She sat with her elbows on her knees, and hands clasped beneath her chin.

"Yes Commander. "

Sensing a small level of stress in Shepard, John decided to speak privately to her over their personal COM channel. People usually made the mistake that Spartans were anti-social, but their so-called sociopathic tendencies came from the fact that they were either alienated or treated with great reverence by other UNSC personnel. John would never forget those who treated him as his equal, those who sat with him during mealtimes. Sadly, he would never see those faces again.

As a senior officer, the Spartan could tell whenever someone needed consolation. Shepard could fool a lot of people with her tough-girl faÃ§ade, but she was still human, and she went through more than a lifetime's worth of pain and horror. John recalled a small conversation Joker had with Jane about her stress levels, she had been adamant that she was fine, but Joker didn't buy it, and neither did John. A serious, yelling and humourless Jeff was someone to be always taken seriously. Shepard needed support.

He knew she didn't like to appear weak in front of others, so he decided to remain standing, with a hand on the over hung rung.

Alerted to the fact that Jane had an incoming call, her helmet slid back into place and reformed at the seams.

"I'm fine," she said softly, "thanks for asking."

"You don't seem like it."

Shepard scoffed lightly, slightly surprised at John playing shrink. He found that slightly endearing.

"A bit overwhelmedâ€| but I'm fine, really," Jane reassured with a light hearted tone. "And thanks."

She sounded sincere, and relieved, maybe it was the fact that someone did care for both her physical and psychological condition, gave her peace and reassurance. Small gestures went a long way for her. She appreciated what John did for her.

The soft rumble of reverse thrusters alerted John that the Osprey had finally reached the hangar bay. The dropship's landing gear extended and touched down softly. John was greeted to the sight of a grim crewmen and Marines tending to various activities. News of the Flood travelled fast, and now they were all preparing for the worst.

A flight of Albatross Heavy Dropships took off; inbound for the dozens of refugee habitats that needed to be quarantined.

As the group reached a security checkpoint, the avatar of Preston waved them over.

"Cortana," the AI gave a curt nod.

"Preston," the female AI smiled softly. "Any news?"

"Yes, Admiral Lasky wants the Spartans to have a bit of R'n'R before going out."

"How long?" Palmer asked, having been quiet for most of the trip.

"Six hours."

No complaints were heard as the team broke off into their smaller respective groups. Jane decided to head back to the Normandy with John in tow. There were a few details that needed to be taken care of, most of which should've been done by Administration and Command - but most of them were dead.

John was slightly concerned at Shepard overworking herself again; she seemed to be working harder than when he was taking down the Collectors "if that was possible. She was going to burn herself out unless she took a step back and let others handle it.

"You need to take a break," the Spartan said as the two boarded an empty transport tube.

"I'm fine, really."

John retracted his visor and shot her a concerned look.

"Really, I'm fine," she practically pleaded.

"Let someone else handle it, you'll burn yourself out."

Jane sat down near the grey metal door of the pod and retracted her helmet. "They have enough work cut out for themselves as it is."

This time John glared. Shepard winced under his gaze. He had no idea his glare was that potent, Jane was one to shy away or wince" he should use it more.

John decided to dim down the pod's lights. He knew that lighting had a profound psychological effect, toning down the intense white light would help Shepard relax a bit. It seemed to be a good idea to as they passed over a luminous garden, filled with growing vines and flowers.

A small smile spread across Jane's face as she appreciated the magnificent view beneath her. Areas like these were to help stressed people.

Upon reaching the docking bay that held Normandy, the pods doors parted open. A group of off duty Marines stepped aside and formed a small honour guard. They saluted the Spartan as he walked past them and gave them a curt bow. Some of them failed to hide their surprise as they saw his face.

John noticed that Shepard's footfalls were softer, and she had a

slight sway in her shoulders. She was less tensed now.

"I could use a drink," Jane sighed, "Serrice Ice Brandy sounds real nice right about now."

That explains a lotâ€| the Spartan thought.

"Good," said another voice, she sounded maternal and warm. "I brought a bottle with me."

"Mom!" Jane beamed.

To Jane, it felt like a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

Despite what had happened, John was confident that Shepard was stable. Seeing those close to her in good health, did wonders for her mental condition. It was really the only thing that kept her going through dark times. And the Spartan knew that another dark storm was coming, one that will consume many people before it will be ended.

****XXxxXX****

"_Your mistake was thinking that they're military hardwareâ€| ironic considering your stance against _my_ Spartans. Now you made the same mistake with the Arcani Program, you treated them as assets, as machines. Maybe that was how you conditioned them to be, but how long will that last?"

>_**-Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey, to Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Ahâ€| the Citadel has been destroyed.****

****To Lanake (anonymous reviewr), I don't know if you made it this far yet, but there are a few things I need to iron out. First off, I have play Halo on a frequent basis. Characters may seem out of character, but that's because they're in a different setting.****

****Different settings include:****

****He's been with ONI for some time now â€" so he knows how to blend.**

>He's a Commander, he needs to be sociable to a ****certain******

extent.

>I wouldn't call him a victim, just really damaged. He lost the people he was closest with.

****The MJOLNIR Armour, notice how I mentioned it's a later model? (Also, the whole "Armour bolted together" was not concocted up until recently by Karen Traviss. I just went on the assumption that Nylund created.)****

â€|

****Anyway thanks for all your support, and please review.****

44. The Beginning of the End

****A/N: Hats off to 888 for being the 888****th**** reviewer****

â€|

****Day 6352, the humans suspect nothing.****

â€|

****Crying manly tears after watching *_**Brotherhood of War**_**.**

>I think I might be losing my grip on reality and sanity.

â€|

****So, no one mentioned the destruction of the Citadelâ€| hatred of the Council must run deep.****

****Well, it's recap time.****

****Coalition has built habitats to support a growing refugee population.**

>Crucible's construction has been completed, however during a firing sequence, the Flood decided spring their plans into action, thus a Synthesis beam was fired, merging all organic and synthetic life into a new hybrid form. The Flood then begins to assimilate the Citadel's network, forcing the Coalition to execute containment protocols. However, dozens of Flood transports managed to escape.

****On the Cerberus front, Admiral Parangosky has now ordered Aegis Defence Contracts to aid the "human supremacist" group.****

****XXxxXX****

"_It's a bad day to be in office when you've got rogue cells and parasites running around."

>_**-Sandman**_

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC *_**MAJESTIC**_**, CENTRAL BRIEFING ROOM, SERPENT NEBULA â€" THE REMAINS OF THE CITADEL****

The amphitheatre's design was in consistency with UNSC "luxurious" military themes. Overhanging glazed glass panels with can-lights in the centre, upward wall mounted flouro lights, navy carpet and an amalgamation of metal white and timber panels on the walls with navy curtains draped over them.

UNSC Anaylsts and Top Brass sat in the amphitheatre, watching the latest Alliance News Network Broadcasts. The segment was disturbing for most people in the room.

"_As you can see here, mass of angry demonstrators take to the streets in their bid to express outrage at the destruction of the

Citadel," _the Asari reporter said. There seemed to be no humans in sight, save for the Marines in riot control gear.

The feed provided a clear view of a large garden courtyard as ground zero for the protestors. Most of them were yelling obscenities and making false proclamations. The most Anti-human of the protestors were claiming that the Flood was an excuse to destroy the Citadel, and thus pave the way for human domination.

Sitting at the table up on stage, Lasky had to suppress his urge to show any form of emotion. He was an Admiral of the UNSC's exemplary ship after all. He looked into the darkened seating areas of the audience, and could see the pulsing blue glows of their skin and eyes. He gazed down at his clasped hands, watching the wave of blue patterns roll.

Good intentions just have a way of biting you in the ass, he thought, thinking about the riots. As soon as the segment ended, the stage spotlights turned on, and Hood walked up onto the Podium.

"The arrival of the Flood is an unfortunate complication," the Admiral said animatedly. A stoic figure would not aid morale in times like these. "Reports are coming in from our scientists have confirmed our worst fears."

"And what are those fears exactly?" asked a senator.

"Ten years ago, our scientists discovered that the Flood had evolved to the point that they can assimilate digital technology," Hood answered, "We're not talking about the acceleration of AI rampancy, but actual assimilation of computer systems. From preliminary reporters, the Flood have increased rate of assimilation after the event our scientists are calling, Synthesis."

"What are the plans to contain the outbreak?" asked another politician.

"Anything within acceptable guidelines," Hood answered, looking at the man intently.

Thomas knew what that meant. The Coalition would soon be authorising NOVA strikes, premature Stellar Collapses and the Halo Array. Contained Array Strikes would mean the continual re-deployment of the Halo rings, which would take an incredibly of resources and time.

The air in the room could be described as tense and anxiety, everyone was well aware of the Flood's capabilities. But the galaxy's reaction to the destruction of the Citadel could prove to be a hindrance.

"However, we have other reports that have beenâ€| concerning," Hood added. "According to our recon elements, the Reaper Forces have offered a truce and have broken their sieges on planets."

â€|

****DELTA-5 BARRACKS****

Thorne gently picked up the white marble queen piece and moved it across the board. Satisfied with his move, he leaned back into the black leather couch.

Arca furrowed his brows in thought, and adjusted his seat. He moved a knight to counter the queen's threat, and put Thorne's rook at risk.

"Well, you're forked," Palmer said, placing her drink down on the glass table before sitting down on the couch.

Gabriel leaned forward to find a way to minimise his losses, his burgundy tie swung towards the table, prompting him to sweep it aside.

"Tie clip," Arca said.

"Left it back in my room," came the reply.

Palmer took another swill from her drink before asking, "Where's Lotus?"

"No idea," Arca and Thorne said in unison.

The game continued uninterrupted for another ten minutes until the chrome doors slid open.

"Where the hell have you been?" Arca asked Lotus as the latter entered the lounge.

Lotus plopped himself onto an adjacent chair and straightened his black tie. He looked at his friend with a saddened expression, sagged shoulders and head bent slightly forward.

"Arca, I haven't been entirely truthful with you," he said. This caused Palmer and Thorne to look at each other in confusion, not understanding what was going on.

"What happened?" Arca asked seriously.

Lotus sighed, and said in a solemn tone, "I didgagoogity your cousin. I gashmoiyygaty her gaflavity with my googus, and I'm not sorry."

Arca slapped his palm to his forehead and shook his head. "I hate you."

Understanding the reference, Thorne gave a light chuckle, whereas Palmer just frowned.

"How old are you guys again?" she asked.

"But seriously though, Shepard wants to meet us at the _Normandy_."

"Give me a moment," Arca said, raising a finger.

He moved a bishop into another position and smiled, "checkmate!"

â€|

****ABOARD SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-**_**2, DOCK-C15****

Jane was incredibly happy to see her mother again, alive and well. Apparently she had been helping out with Logistics on the Crucible. Throwing all forms of professionalism aside once more, Jane wrapped her arms around her mother and gave her a near crushing hug.

"Take care of yourself, Jane," Helena said warmly.

"I will mom," the Spectre nodded.

The Rear-Admiral disappeared amongst the throng of Alliance soldiers as the members of Fifth Element appeared. They were all wearing conservative business suits minus the blazer, and had their sleeves rolled up because of the temperature. Shepard never imagined Palmer to be the one to wear a suit, but it suited her quite nicely, maybe it was due to that light sway she had whenever she walked.

"Plan?" Arca asked.

"Briefing room, I'll tell you all about it," Shepard answered.

The group made idle chitchat as they walked into the conference room and took their respective seats. Already, everyone had been updated on Galactic relations. The Reapers may have stopped their campaign of galactic genocide, but that didn't mean the threats have subsided.

On one side of the timber table, sat Shepard's non-UNSC cadre, and on the other side were her new found allies. She moved up to the holoprojector and displayed the galactic map.

"Due to unforeseen circumstances, Aria T'Loak has upped the date of her attack on Omega," Jane began. "Her fleet just made the jump before the Relays were taken out. They're requesting our help as a back-up."

"How'd she contact us?" Garrus asked, "Never mind, I'd rather not know."

"It's nothing illegalâ€| well in her sense," Shepard said with mirth. "Just remember, it's in our best interest to have her controlling the Terminus System."

With the quick update on a few other things, such as guidelines on how to use the bar and gym, the group left for their respective places on the ship.

"Arca, Lotus, could you guys stay behind?" Shepard asked, though it sounded more like an order.

The two ONISAD Operatives returned back to their seats and straightened out their ties. John decided to stand, and lean against the metal wall.

"Cerberus," Jane said.

It was her way of voicing her concern. She knew about Cerberus's ties

to the UNSC. She was there when Arca and Lotus had concluded that the men who killed the Councillors and Williams, were ONISAD.

"Greenfield contacted me," Arca said, "said that Parangosly was moving a couple of assets into Omega. Aegis Defence Contracts, a battalion of Helljumpers, and six teams of Arcani, fresh from training."

"Recommendations?" Shepard asked, folding her arms.

"I'd say we wait it out until Hood can get us reinforcements," Lotus said. "But under the circumstances, we should go. Parangosky has an entire PMC defending the place."

The Operative rested his elbows on the table and continued. "We don't have the best of relations with Aegis. We need to find out what it is."

"It's not ideal Shepard," John said, and gave her a look that said, _but this is one of those things_ like the Collector Base_.

â€|

****TERMINUS SYSTEMS, RALLY POINT FOR ARIA'S FLEET****

From the captured and retrofitted Cerberus Cruiser, Elbrus, a lone shuttle made its way across the bustling formation of the mercenary fleet. It approached the most dangerous ship in the system, which was the _Normandy_.

By UNSC classification, the once _small_ frigate was now a stealth destroyer. By Council Classification, the ship was a stealth super-dreadnought. The shield doors of the hangar bay eased open, allowing the shuttle to fade through the containment fields.

The transport hissed as its landing thrusters kicked in, and lowered itself gently onto the blue metal deck.

As soon as the hatch opened, Aria walked out onto the hangar with her loyal bodyguards in tow. Her body language and facial expressions said it all. Aegis had changed the game. The only reason why the Cerberus ships weren't attacking them was because that they feared there might be an ambush. A good ruseâ€| but one that wouldn't last forever.

"Shepard, good to see you. Everything has hit the fan when reinforcement showed up," Aria said in her usual demeanour. Her eyes ran up and down the Commander's larger build and armour, before looking at her uncovered face.

Out of the corners of her eyes, Shepard watched Bray, Aria's top henchmen, shift uneasily as he caught sight of the _larger_ humans. The ones with the red glowing optics weren't doing much to sooth his nerves. Jane had to force herself not to smile at the cleverness of ONISAD's psychological warfare.

"What were you planning at first?" Jane asked, folding her arms. Already she needed to establish some kind of dominance over the Queen

of Omega. It wouldn't do with Aria calling the shots with UNSC Assets.

"Punch through Cerberus lines, then take back Omega. They won't dare fire on _my_ station with their General inside," the Asari said coldly.

Shepard arched an eyebrow, inquiring more about the Cerberus leader. Aria motioned to Bray to project a profile of the garrison's CO via his Omni-tool. The Spectre guessed it was an expensive model that the Batarian was wielding, since the projection was in high-definition and colour.

"General Oleg Petrovsky," Aria said, "one ruthless bastard. He ousted me when he took over Omega."

Jane noticed the wording. _'He ousted me when he took over Omega'_, it meant that Petrovsky let her go. Something Shepard wouldn't bring up just yet, but it seemed that the Spartans had also picked up on the underlying message.

"Shit," Arca muttered over the private COMs, "he's still going by that?"

Shepard rolled her shoulders as her a message to the Operative. She still kept her expression neutral, not wanting to give away anything just yet.

"He's clever and he's smart," the Asari continued, "He's the Illusive Man's well-kept secret and best tactician. Taking Omega from him will be difficult, but not impossible."

Seeing a small pause in Aria, Arca continued. "Petrovsky, that's his cover name. Real name is Clarence Ledi Gretski, callsign Kestrel."

Shepard let out a small sigh, indicating her simmering annoyance and shock. _Shit had just hit the fucking fanâ€¦ and clogged it_, her mind screamed.

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"_Soâ€¦ in all seriousness, why don't we just use take a vacation?"

>_**-Unidentified ONISAD-SOG Operative**_

****XXxxxXX****

****A/N: Sorry guys, my PC crashed so yeah.****

****Anyway, another chapter will be coming out soon. It is the battle of Omega.****

****So, please review.**
>

45. Hostile Takeovers

****A/N: It's falling into place****

****XXxxXX****

"_The Synthesis Event has in effect, created a hybrid of organic and synthetic life. It is likely that this event will allay future conflicts centred specifically on Organics against Non-Organics. However, it has left all sentience vulnerable to the Flood threat."

>_**-Doctor Delilah Orton and Doctor Amanda Thorakis's report on the Synthesis Event**_

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****ABOARD UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, SERPENT NEBULA****

Sitting in the well decorated board room, Keyes rested his hands on the timber table and looked at one of the wall mounted screens. He could see fleets of stratosentinels hauling resources and towing debris in order to rebuild the Citadel.

The Coalition had already redeployed their Fleets to possible locations of Flood Outbreaks in order to minimise casualties. Essingdon knew the Coalition wasn't going to make the same mistakes like the Forerunners did, but he also was aware of the fact that the combined forces of the galaxy could barely match the once majestic race.

Even after discovering the Archives, there were still thousands if not millions of undiscovered Forerunner structures. There was a strong possibility that there was an installation out there, devoted to Flood research. What are the odds that they will remain secure?

Too many things going on at once, Essingdon sighed.

The galaxy was still torn over the events that instigated the Synthesis Incident. Most were happy at the possibilities that Synthesis has opened up for life, but few, like him, were concerned. The Geth had sent continual envoys to create some form of armistices. Their green glowing skin did not pass by unnoticed.

Cortana mentioned Flood assimilation of the Flood at an accelerating rate,_ 256 has reported that he feels "alive". I wonder how the guy feels being on the Ark again._

Donnie shifted in his seat, brushing the area just below his nose with the back of his thumb. Hood had called him here for a reason. It had to be something very important. A gut feeling said that it had something to do with Parangosky.

Keyes straightened out his tie and flicked a speck of dust off his black uniform before looking at the glistening gold insignia on his cap. Alerted the opening door, he instantly stood up from his seat and snapped a salute. Hood walked in, with a small box cradled in his hand.

"At ease, Keyes," Hood said as he took off his cap and set it down on the table. The Admiral took his seat, opposite from the Lieutenant Colonel.

Essingdon sat down, with a perplexed expression.

"These are, desperate times," Hood began, placing the box in the middle of the table. "Or it soon will be. We have to take someâ€¦ unorthodox measures."

"What do you mean sir?"

"Normally we'd have a ceremony for this," Hood elaborated, "but it can't wait. In short, we're promoting you. It's a unanimous decision by the Brass, and honestly, it should've been done sooner."

Keyes tilted his head and arched an eyebrow.

"You're now the Director of ONI, General Keyes."

Essingdon was numb; his mind was still processing what had just been said.

"Sir?" was all that came out of his mouth.

Hood smiled, and pushed the box towards Keyes. The now promoted General gingerly ran his fingers along the glazed cardboard and opened it. Inside were four-star insignias to be placed on his uniform.

"Wow," Donnie muttered.

Terrence gave a light chuckle. "You've earned this a long time ago."

"What about Parangosky?" Keyes asked, his mind kicking back into full gear.

The Fleet Admiral's face tuned to a scowl. "Greenfield has found additional evidence to suggest Parangosky had gone Fifth Column. Brass instantly gave a vote of no-confidence."

"I take her place?"

"Yes," Hood nodded.

"What about Group Seven?"

Group-7 was the designation for ONI's Defence Fleet. Their flagship was Night Horse. Keyes was concerned about the Group's loyalty.

"They don't ask questions," Hood supplied, "you've just got to worry about every Element after twelve."

Essingdon looked at the table before looking back up again.

"Has Sixth tried to contact you in anyway?"

"I did hear something, but it was hard to authenticate. They said they were at the galaxy's end."

Keyes mulled over the statement. "Oh shit, they're at Omega."

Ignoring the cuss, Hood added another statement. "Aegis Defence Contracts is in that area."

"And a few rogue UNSC units."

"I can't spare anyone right now," Hood sighed frustratedly.

"I'll take Group-Seven and see what I can do," Keyes said, getting up from his seat.

"Good luck," Terrence added, standing up and shaking the General's hand.

A bit unorthodoxâ€| but what the hell.

â€|

****HANGAR BAY-12****

Walking along the metal deck, Keye's new uniform glinted under the spotlights. He was flanked by four men from the 3rd Airborne Division, all in their BDU, and cradling Sabre-L in their hands. Dozens of crewmen steered out of the scientist's path as he headed towards an awaiting Greyhawk-89D. It was sleek, and armed to the teeth.

Liara joined him by his side; she was almost beaming with joy for himâ€| almost, after all the Asari was well aware of the responsibilities that the Director of a Clandestine Organisation had to endure.

"Congratulations on your promotion, Keyes," T'Soni said professional.

Essingdon's bodyguard detail had just assumed she was a contact or a liaison between ONI and the Asari government. None of them realised that she wielded almost as much power as Keyes did. She was the Shadow Broker, all things considered.

Six ODSs stood guard around the stealth ship. They quickly saluted the General as he boarded the craft, before mounting the transport.

Keyes felt the engines rumble as the Greyhawk eased off the deck and towards Group-7, lying in wait. He peered out the window and saw an escort of six Broadswords and three Claymores. According to the feed on his tacpad, there were two Griffin Stealth Multi-role Attack Fighters in the area.

Already ONI had a welcoming party for their new director. Essingdon guessed that Parangosky wasn't exactly a universally loved person.

"Welcome to Greyhawk flight Super One-one, I'm your pilot Lieutenant Barney Haverson, callsign Swarley." said the pilot cheerily. His voice sounded 'young', no older than thirty. His callsign reminded Keyes of his favourite 21st Century TV show.

"As all flying regulations, please refrain from smoking in the cabin,

and have your seatbelt strapped on at all times."

The phrase was ironic considering how many victory smokes SMU Operators took after they were extracted.

"Should you feel airsick, there is an airsickness bag in the seatback in front of you. Estimated time of arrival to Night Horse is ten minutes, our weather cast says it going to be space weather so please wear something warm before you depart this vessel."

Keyes gave a soft chuckle while Liara rolled her eyes, not grasping the full extent of the joke. He had always found her to be a little too seriousâ€¦ despite her age.

All of Group-7 decloaked and appeared in perfect formation, optimised for both attack and defence. Swarley calmly came in on the correct approach vector, per protocol.

The cobalt engines dimmed as it entered the main landing bay of Night Horse. Gently, Swarley set down the customised bird onto a landing pad, in front of an awaiting honour guard. As the doors parted open, Keyes walked down onto the deck with Liara by his side.

The Marines saluted the General as he walked amongst them. Keyes was Army, unlike his sister and father who were Navy. Technicalities and ironies weren't lost on him as he was a General, in command of stealth fleets and every asset available to ONI. However, looking at it from a different angle, he was a Director. ONI now also answered to the UEG, a sign of good faith from the UNSC. It would probably make more sense of people were to address him as Director rather than General.

"Generalâ€¦ or Director Keyes," the ship's AI, Haverson greeted. Unlike Cortana, Haverson chose to inhabit the ship, rather than a hardlight body. His avatar was Director Micheal David Haverson in his thirties, ONI's first civilian Director. He was the one that started ONISAD. The AI had deep brown hair, a slim face, glasses, and wore black business attire, minus the jacket and sleeves rolled up, thus revealing the "concealed weapon".

"Any title will do fine," Keyes replied. "You are Haveron, I believe."

"Yes, General," the AI said, choosing to acknowledge Keyes's military background.

Essingdon began to walk to the elevators. Haverson's avatar was projected from the ship's overhanging projectors, giving the impression that the Avatar was walking with him.

Keyes saw the smiling figure of Fhadjad standing by the door. Unlike most Spartans, Fhadjad preferred to be dressed in uniform rather than the standard fatigue. He held out a hand which Keyes took and shook.

"A bit unorthodox," the Spartan-II said, refering to the promotion, "but you're better than the alternative."

"It's a bit much," Keyes said, still overwhelmed.

"Orders, sir?" the AI asked.

"Set a course for Omega."

The AI's hologram winked out of existence.

"Fhadjad," Keyes said, turning to his friend. "Prep a team, we're cleaning house."

The small group stepped into the elevator, Essingdon dismissed his bodyguards. When the doors slid shut, he continued on the conversation.

"Brass wants us to keep this under the radar," the General continued.

"So we're going to kill her?" the Spartan-II asked, barely hiding the contempt in his voice. He had been part of the team trying to find a loop hole for Halsey to get out when Parangosky decided to execute her personal vendetta.

"We're cleaning house aren't we?" Keyes answered.

Judging from the mannerisms between Essingdon and the Asari, Fhadjad came to the conclusion that Liara could be trusted. After all, Keyes never made a mistake. And from what Fhadjad had read, TSoni was in command of a vast network of intelligence. Having her as an ally would be invaluable.

The elevators stopped, at the central level of the ship, allowing the group to step out onto the white tiled floor.

"Another thing," Fhadjad added, "Miranda wants to talk to you."

Essingdon arched an eyebrow.

"Hood had her transferred and retrofitted Divinus into a stealth ship," Fhadjad explained, "unorthodox, but hey, the man knows what he's doing."

Keyes smiled. "May he continue to take liberties of doing things for us."

"Indeed," Fhadjad concurred.

The three walked down the impressive white metal hallway before Fhadjad broke off and headed towards the barracks. Donnie lead Liara over a catwalk encased in glass, it overlooked ODSs performing their standard drills.

"I am somewhat jealous," the Asari said.

"Last I heard, you had a ship," Keyes said with a mock huff.

"It wasn't space worthy, and I didn't have a fleet with me."

"It could fly through an electrical storm," Keyes elaborated, "that's impressive."

"But you're the Director for ONI."

"And you're the Shadow Broker," Essingdon countered.

â€|

****ABOARD UNSC **_**DIVINUS**_**, OFFICER QUARTERS****

In a room with deemed lights, a woman sat on the bed with her legs crossed. She was young, but at the same time, she had seen her fair share of the worst the galaxy had to offer. Captain Samantha (Sammi) Salas of Hunter 5-7 in the 105th ODS Division, callsign; Huntress. She had long rich ebony hair hung down her toned back, she had a high cheekbone face, calm brown eyes, rosy skin, and a calm demeanour that would sooth anyone's nerves.

She was a striking woman, elegant and graceful in her own way, very few things could faze her. So when Sammi had head that the Divinus was being transferred into Group-7, she thought nothing of it. That was until the Destroyer began to be retrofitted for Stealth Applications.

Through an address from Commander Miranda Keyes, Salas learnt that Group-7 was the beating heart of ONI. To say that she was scared was an understatement. She had heard rumours from Greyhawk pilots that this was where the secretive ONISAD-SOG was based. And if half of those rumours were true about the UNSC's most notorious, well, it made her blood run cold and skin crawl.

Salas gazed at her nightstand and picked up the framed photo. It had been taken a long time ago, yet so well preserved. Her slender fingers trailed the mahogany frame as she peered at the faces on the photo.

It was a post-graduation party, held at a hall amongst Exemplar, Royal and Corbulo students. Sammi had taken her photo with students from Exemplar and Corbulo. The neat ranks of navy blue stood behind the ranks of white. So many in the photo had lost their lives to war, it brought a saddened expression over Salas's face. The only people she last heard were alive were Etrius, Adrian, Bryce, Essingdon, and Alicia.

From what she had been told, Essingdon was with Research and Development for the UNSC. Etrius, Bryce and Adrian were field doctors working in the yellow zones of the Magellanic Clouds. And Alicia was a Griffin Pilot in the 208th SOAR.

A knock at the door, pulled Salas out of her deep thought.

"Come in," Salas said, swinging her legs off the bed.

The door slid open, revealing Commander Miranda Keyes, still in full uniform.

"Ma'am," Salas quick saluted.

"Captain, at ease," Keyes said, stepping into the room. "We're headed to Omega, have you heard of it?"

"No, Commander," Salas shook her head.

"Bad place," Miranda said, folding her arms. "It's like the red zones at home."

Sammi saw Keyes scan the picture in her hands, and raise an eyebrow. Salas already knew that Essingdon was Miranda's baby brother.

"We're headed to Omega, mission is strictly off radar," Keyes said with extreme gravity. "You're going to see someâ€¦ unsettling things there."

Now it was Salas's turn to be perplexed. There weren't that many things that could catch off guard. She had played mop-up for the UNSC's most notorious. How bad could Omega be?

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_** TERMINUS SYSTEMS, OMEGA NEBULA, SAHRABARIK, RETAKING OMEGA****

Omega, in a nutshell, it is the anus of the galaxy. It only seemed right to have the UNSC's most infamous paving the way for Aria's fleet. The massive station sat idyllic amongst the asteroid belt, surrounded by the Cerberus Fleet, and much to the dismay of John, Aegis Defence Contracts were also there in full force.

Seeing the PMC's fleet formation, John frowned. In term of naval power, two Aegis naval groups could prove a match for one UNSC naval group.

"Open fire as soon as they're in range, Joker," Shepard said, gripping the Flight Lieutenant's seat.

"Aye, aye, ma'am," Moreau complied.

Normandy's crew had been brought to full alert; each person was at their station, crunching through the numbers for optimal performance. The Stealth Destroyer glided through the vacuum, careful to avoid asteroids and cold wreckages of mercenary ships.

"Aegis Defence Contracts have mobilised," the shipboard AI said.

Jane looked up at the viewscreen and saw the ADF ships highlighted in red, and a FoF marker. But without warning, half a dozen suns appeared in the asteroid belt, engulfing everything in range. Asteroids were shattered and hurled outwards by the blinding white light. Shepard was thankful that she was viewing this via the monitor, and not the viewport.

Preplaced nuclear mines had been deployed by ONISAD-SOG Operatives. They had a ship around here, most likely a Prowler, considering the team's size.

"Targeting solution available," EDI said.

The closet Cerberus Cruisers was highlighted in a green reticule over the view screen.

Shepard felt her ship shudder as the Ion cannon sprang to life and emitted a vibrant blue beam. The lance ran home and true, gutting ship through from stem to stern. It boiled the armour away and ruptured the reactor core. The Cerberus's armour warped and billowed outwards in a brilliant ball of fire and molten metal, before being shredding itself apart. Huge burning hull chunks were hurled outwards, some slammed onto nearby vessels causing their shields to flare.

"Additional targets in range of plasma torpedoes," EDI informed.

More Cerberus Cruisers were highlighted over the display. Side hatches on the _Normandy_ slid open, allowing violet plasma to collect at the coils of the turrets sheathed within. Arcs of bolts streaked through space and slammed into the vessels.

Shields flared and overloaded, with nothing left to stop the superdense bolts of savage energy, the ships' armour was boiled away. Sparks were sent hurtling through space by the venting atmosphere. Four more Cerberus ships began to roll listlessly, with gaping wounds riddling their hulls, as _Normandy_ glided past them.

"Aria, hole is punched, commence your approach," Shepard broadcasted over the COMs.

The mercenary fleet, a pitiful band of retrofitted ships and decommissioned warships, began to mobilise. Shepard knew that there was no way in hell Aria's fleet could've taken on the Cerberus armada. Already, dozens of Cerberus Cruisers and Frigates came in on an intercept course to engage the forward elements.

What was once an empty space, was soon lined with fiery rounds. _Elbrus_, a Cerberus Cruiser that Aria had captured and upgraded, was roaring in with its autocannons blazing. A Cerberus Frigate's shields barely withstood the onslaught of rounds before failing and winking out of existence. Its light armour offered little protection for the crew against the AP rounds that shred through the hull and tore through the decks.

The frigate rotated and sputtered before being torn asunder. Debris and molten slag billowed out like a blossoming flower. Atmosphere from within the ship was ignited as it was vented into space. There was no way in hell anyone could've survived.

Normandy flew straight through the field of debris, red hot hull sections bounced across its shields. As soon as other Cerberus ships managed to get a lock, they began firing. Joker through the Stealth Vessel into a wild dive before pulling out in a climb and banking wildly again, dozens of rounds missed the ship, while others slammed into the golden shields.

"Shields holding at seventy-three-point-four-two per cent," EDI said.

"I don't really like flying back seat," Cortana muttered to John.

Unlike everyone else who was holding for dear life in bracing positions. Cortana stood on the Command Deck as if she was just

discussing the weather.

"They're not half bad," John said, referring to Joker and EDI.

Scores of Aria's ships flew into the fire, only to be torn to ribbons by the savage volume of fire. Some however, managed to make it through and followed the _Normandy_ and _Elbrus_ in.

"Defence systems detected on Omega," EDI informed, "Mark-Two Guardian Cannons."

"They'll turn Aria's Fleet into nothing but slag," Shepard muttered with a frown. "EDI, take them out if you can."

"Aye. Aye, Shepard."

Gun turrets on the _Normandy_ were unsheathed, and with targeting coordinates punched in, they opened fired. Thousands of energy lances darted through space and struck the firing defence cannons.

Orange and blue clashed as both sides desperately tried to take the other out. _Normandy_ had suffered little damage so far, but had accumulated a large number of kills. It was evident of the trail of destruction that trailed in the ship's wake.

Suddenly, a riptide of small explosions tore through the station's defences. Preplaced explosive had created a null-zone in the field of fire, allowing Aria's ships to funnel through.

"ETA two minutes to drop off," Joker said, "give 'em hell boys and girls."

Omega began to fill out the viewport, Cerberus fighters could be seen dispatching from their hangars.

Shepard released her grip from Joker's chair, and turned for the elevators. She beckoned for John and Cortana to follow her.

The three quickly moved down into the hangar bay, where they found everyone ready and waiting to go. Cortana quickly placed her palm against John's armour, and merged into his suit's systems. The Spartan felt the cool rush of mercury and the brief hint of vertigo. He certainly missed the feeling.

"Hmm, good to be back home," Cortana said chirpily. She remote controlled her monitor platform to safely dock itself on a bench on the far side of the bay.

Allowing Shepard to board the Greyhawk first, John soon followed after.

"Always the gentlemen, aren't you, Commander Richards?" the AI cooed.

The Spartan raised an eyebrow, and thankful that he had his helmet sealed on.

"Yeah, I read the files if that's what you're wondering. Parangosky has nothing on me!" Cortana smiled triumphantlyâ€| well it sounded

like she was smiling.

"Commander, we are within range of Omega, you are clear for â€" Holy shit!" Joker yelled over the COM.

"What is it Joker?" Shepard asked worriedly.

The Greyhawk's doors hissed shut as the hangar bay parted open.

"Aria has just rammed the _Elbrus_ into Omega, Gozu District," Jeff answered incredulously. "Better get in there quick before she does something stupid."

"Aye, aye," Shepard concurred, and turned to Cortez in the pilot seat. "Take us in."

"Yes, ma'am," Steve complied.

His fingers danced across the console and flicked a few switches. The Stealth Dropship's engines silently came to life and lifted off the deck. Rounding the bird onto the runway, Cortez throttled the Greyhawk into the abyss.

"Put us on the same approach vector as _Elbrus_, Lieutenant," Shepard said, pointing at the gaping wound in Omega into space.

Atmospheric containment shields had already been deployed, preventing the precious air from escaping.

"Aye, aye."

Shepard felt the Greyhawk shift from under her. She watched the ominous red lights that pierced through space and glowed down upon the overgrown station. Older records of Omega had revealed it to be once a beautiful piece of architecture and engineering. But the eons of criminals and lawless had turned the station into a hole. There were arms, and sections jutting out like peeled skin, exhaust ports were breathing out flame.

Jane walked back into the cabin and looked at the team involved for retaking Omega. Everyone looked ready; some had incredulous looks on their face, not believing that they're helping the criminal underworld to retake their home.

Vega sat near the side door, checking the sights on his Sabre-L. He seemed to be itching to get back into the fight. Likewise for Javik.

Garrus seemed to have this air of serenity and calmness within him. It was like a coming home partyâ€| for him anyway. He cradled the M-98 Black Widow in his arms like a father holding his newborn son. The menacing anti-material sniper rifle had been outfitted with every upgrade possible, and it certainly went well with his blue and gold armour.

Thane was going through his prayers and meditations as he always did. The calm green pulse from the Synthesis Event seemed to give him a spiritual air. Ironic, all things considered. He was also wearing black ultra-light armour over his clothing now.

Legion was standing aroundâ€¦_twiddling_ his thumbs. Things had been hectic lately, but Legion's new behaviour after the Synthesis Event did not fail to capture Shepard's attention. EDI had said that the Geth platform had now fully self-actualised. Tali would flipâ€¦ if she was still here. But then again, she would've already flipped out when negotiating a peace treaty.

Shepard turned her gaze left and saw John starring out of the viewport. He was the only person on board to have their helmet on. The Spartan turned to look at her, and she gave him a small smile. He replied with a curt nod. It was their way of saying they'll look out for one another.

The Spectre continued to assess her team. Wizard and Rook were talking food and Sweet William Cigars â€" of all things.

Palmer and Thorne were busy checking their weapons. Sarah was armed with an M770 SASR, and Thorne went with the traditional Sabre-H outfitted like an LMG. They looked different in the CTS-Suit, rather than their MJOLNIR armour. Thorne seemed to be fine wearing it, while Palmer still had gripes about it being a bit to revealing.

Revealing armour my ass, my last gear was just like this, Jane thought.

Lotus was busy examining his Katana and tomahawk, occasional activating the plasma blade. Jane notice some of her old crew would flinch whenever the blades sparked to life.

Arca had his right hand to his ear, talking to his contacts, whilst he flexed his prosthetic left arm. His brows were furrowed in concentration, and his blue eyes were devoid of human emotion.

"Copy," he said into his mic. "Echo-Four and Echo-Three follow us in. Echo-Nine, keep us covered."

"Acknowledged, Echo-Five, we'll see you soon," Sandman replied. And the COM flicked off.

The Greyhawk shuddered as Cortez guided it through the ragged hole that had been torn into the station by _Elbrus_. Twisted metal and exposed rebar jutted out in a mangy mess, forcing Cortez to slow down his speed.

The dimly lit slums and the ominous red lights made Shepard's skin crawl. Omega was a hellhole; it was a place where everyone carried a gun. Funnily enough, Jane had never taken the Chief to the heart of crime before. However, his body language seemed to indicate that he had been to places like Omega before.

"On final approach," Cortez said.

The Greyhawk entered into the main chasm beneath the asteroid where _Elbrus_ had unceremoniously landed. Huge sections of buildings had been torn off, exposed wire dangled dangerously, sending sparks flying.

Elbrus had embedded itself near the Gozu district. It was apparent that Aria was aiming for the killing blow. Cut the head off the snake, and then mop up afterwards. A daring tactic, but if her forces get delayed, then she'd have the entire Garrison of Aegis Defence Contracts and Cerberus Forces bearing down on her.

That was Shepard's main concern. To her and her team, Cerberus was a pushover. But according to Arca, Aegis had very skilled Operatives, and they would be well armed. Their main weapon would be the AD17 Weapon series. Tough reliable weapons, and considered to be the AK-47 of its time " better looking of course. And their armour would be lightly shielded " by UNSC standards.

Pound for pound, Cerberus would triumph over Aria's forces. Going toe to toe with Aegis, Aria's people would be torn apart.

With reverse thrusters live, Cortez gently set down the Greyhawk onto the deep grey metal deck, kicking up dust. The dropship's shields flared as stray rounds bounced off it. Vega moved to open the doors, allowing the people on board to pour out.

Shepard was greeted by the _Elbrus_ in a near horizontal position, and it's on board compliment of personnel, suppressing Cerberus's advance. So far, there was no sign of Aegis. Whatever guns were still functional on the captured Cerberus vessel begun to spin to life and push back Cerberus forces.

"We're clear!" a Batarian yelled over the screeching of metal.

Jane scanned her eyes across the environment; _Elbrus_ had managed to embed itself into the Omega skyline. From where she stood, Shepard could see the Gozu District " where Afterlife is located.

Shepard surveyed the towers that surrounded the crashed ship, and could see that Aria's snipers had begun to set up defensive systems. A flight of Cerberus Ground Attack Gunships had already begun to wave off as AA fire was sent their way.

Aria's people began to unpack and create a Forward Operating Base; they were going to lay siege to Afterlife.

"Bray!" the Queen of Omega called. She wore this arrogant smirk as she walked out onto the station. The loyal Batarian body guard arrived with a rifle in hand.

"Situation," she commanded.

"Whatever ships we have left are making for the docks, the men will be here once they carve a path."

"Tell them to hurry."

"Yes ma'am," the Batarian said, before switching to his Omni-tool.

Shepard gazed of the myriad of towers and canyons built within the station. She had a gut feeling that Cerberus had a wide range of contingency plans. They were run by the UNSC's most infamous.

Watching the field of green glowing beings, Jane spotted Arca talking to his COM. Aria's people were giving the ONISAD Operative a wide berth, his red glowing optics and deep grey-black armour was very unsettling.

She turned to John, who appeared to be tensed but not overly. It was like he had been to a place like this before.

"Welcome to Omega, Chief," Shepard said with mock cheeriness.

"Come here often?" the Spartan asked with a slightly jovial tone.

"Used to," Jane shrugged. "Any idea what Arca's got planned?"

John shook his head.

"Hold on, I'm tapping into his COMs," Cortana said via the external speakers.

"Cortana, I don't think he'll appreciate you hacking his COMs," Shepard frowned, folding her arms.

"He'll be fine," the AI said. "I'm in. He's calling in Fourth and Third Elementâ€| and Sixth."

"What?" Shepard's eyes shot up.

"Sixthâ€|"

"I heard you the first time Cortana," Shepard said, regaining control. "The fuck are they doing here?"

"They were set up from the beginning, they're here for payback. Arca's a bit apprehensive talking to them. He's ordered them to go instigate rebellions. That's pretty much it."

Shepard mulled over the tactical decision, and found it to be a good idea. It was clear from the beginning that Arca believed Sixth to be duped, so he was giving them the benefit of the doubt (which wasn't much). Sending Sixth to cause an uprising would prove useful to Shepard, and they wouldn't get in her way. Ashley's death was still raw in her mind. She knew it was bad to hold grudges like these, but it's what makes her human.

It was also clear by the way Arca had positioned himself, that he didn't want Palmer losing focus by worrying about Sixth. He had his body turned away from her, overlooking a canyon.

A few minutes passed and the additional two teams of ONISAD Operatives arrived. They had two UCAD-7Heavies and four UCAD-7Mediums. The Heavies looked like mechanical black panthers with heavy armour plating. The seven barrelled GAU30M Autocannon mounted on the turret, alongside plasma missile pods and oversized Achilles Missile packs. It was capable of traversing over most terrain with its powerful quad legs amalgamated with roller balls for rapid movement.

The Mediums were effectively turrets mounted on H-Frame leg-wheels. It was armed with an oversized Achilles Missile Pack, and the M888D

HMG. The drone was perfect to act as a flanker and a distraction.

John beckoned Shepard to follow him to the gathering of the UNSC's best Operatives. Palmer and Lotus looked bored at best. Rook and Thorne were always on constant vigilance, whereas Wizard was busy configuring the drones.

"Chief," the leader of Third Element, greeted. His accent suggested he came from Hawaiian descent. "I'm Sandman, Echo-Three."

"Bishop," said the man standing next to him.

"Garad," the Operative with the M770 SASR said with a curt nod.

If the past few weeks had taught Shepard anything, ONISAD never saluted everyone. They always responded with a curt nod, but never a salute. And they also had the same taste in fashion. She knew that their armour could be modified to sport different looks, but all of them stuck with the generic look; deep grey and black with red glowing optics (the light function was only used to incite fear, other than that, the Operatives always minimised their signature).

"Echo-Four, Langley," the team leader introduced himself.

"Edwards," the team's marksman said.

"Andrews."

"Situation, gentlemen," Arca asked. By this time, Aria and her top advisor had gather round too, and were watching intently as the ONISAD Operatives unfurled their battle plan.

"We got here a few day ago," Langley said on the behalf of his people, Third and Ninth Element. "Did some prelim scans and this is what we have."

Langley raised his left forearm, allowing an intricate map of Omega take shape in front of everyone. The strangely reminiscent jellyfish shaped station had a few dark spots and places of interests highlighted.

"We wanted to hijack the station's defences, but that avenue didn't work," Sandman said.

Figures, Shepard thought. She noticed how John had his head bowed down a bit, it was clear he was thinking the same thing.

"So we did the next thing and blow them sky high," Langley added. "Cerberus has set up bio-containment fields to keep the populace divided. Any living tissue that touches it will be incinerated."

Jane remembered reading something about Flood Containment measures. Bio-containment fields had been designed and engineered by UNSC scientists. The thought that Cerberus had been a fifth column created by Parangosky made Shepard's blood run cold. It also seemed that her sentiment was shared by everyone who knew the whole story.

"Preplaced explosives will knock out the main grid powering the containment fields," Sandman said. "We've also removed explosives placed on the central support column, so if Petrovsky wants to blow this place upâ€¦ he's going to have a problem."

Aria seemed pleased with this bunch. They had done all the heavily lifting done effortlessly and stealthily.

"There's one other thing," Langley added. The projected image of Omega soon shifted to a hideously deformed bipedal being with dull blue sacks its back.

"This thing of beauty," the Operative said, his voice thick with sarcasm, "is an Adjutant. Moderate armour, moderate barrier. Likes to hunt in packs, very smart and fast too. They like to fire stunner biotic fields before coming in close to bash you to a pulp. I should also mention that they assimilate the dead."

Kinda like the Flood, the voice inside Shepard said.

"They're Cerberus's pet project, and engineered to obey. Shoot them in the sacks to put them out of the fight; otherwise you'll end up as one of them."

Concerned murmurs spread through the crowd who were watching the briefing.

"So what's the plan then?" Aria asked impatiently.

"Simple," Arca shrugged. He gestured to ONISAD. "We'll flank around and hit them from behind, while you knock on their front door. ADC and Cerberus have retreated to tighten their lines."

"I suppose," Aria pondered. "I have my people waiting at rendezvous locations, they'll attack when the word is given."

Arca flexed his fingers and nodded. "Have your people press on Cerberus borders. But tell them to stay in cover."

He said it as if it was the most difficult thing in the world. And from what Shepard had seen of mercenary groupsâ€¦ they had a tendency to advance whilst being shot at.

"Okay," Ariar agreed, "I'll see if I can rally the civilians."

â€¦

Shepard never really thought Aria to be a motivating speaker, but the Asari was, and a good one at that. Already whoever could arm themselves were revolting against their Cerberus occupiers. Save for the people in Gozu District. Most of the area belonged to ADC and Cerberus. Whatever scouting parties Aria had sent out earlier, none of them had checked in. It was clear that they had been picked off by snipers.

"Aegis likes to distract and flank," Lotus said, informing every one of the PMC's combat tactics. "So watch your flanks."

"But importantly," Arca added, "Stay. In. Fucking. Cover. Their guns will rip through you easily."

Jane looked around as the final preparations were taking place. It was certainly nice having people helping her out. She knew that if it had been just her, she would be running around the entire station just to keep it from falling apart before striking at the heart.

But here, and now, everything had been taken care of. All that remained was cutting the dog's head.

****XXxxXX****

"_Aegis is filled with Innies, bounty hunters and just about anyone who hates the UNSC. Those types are deployed in redzones. So they are who we're up against when we're visiting the crimson neighbourhood."

>_**-Zevzda, talking to Fletcher**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** Well what do you guys think? Please leave plenty of reviews and let me know. I love receiving feedback from you all.******

****Regards****

****Andrithir****

****P.S:** If you get the chance, read ****_**Antics on the Normandy**_****, its mainly about characters goofing around with each other, and heavy pop-culture references.******

46. Turn of Events

****A/N:** Greetings everybody, right now, I've been seeing the sights in San Francissco and visiting a few IT companies in Silicon Valley, so I do apologise for the lack of updates.******

****XXxxXX****

"_Firing radiation that targets the neural system requires a lot of power. The Arrays are only effective when they're fired from large installations. Omnipotent-class and Keyships are all armed with Array Weaponry, but firing it leaves the ships to be vulnerable to attack for a critical amount of time."

>_**Doctor Catherine Halsey, referring to the Neural Radiation Array Weaponry**_

****XXxxXX****

****OMEGA, GOZU DISTRICT****

Everyone had split up into their respective groups for the assault. Elements were already advancing through the dark crimson environment of Omega and towards Afterlife, the heart of the station.

John hugged the eerie red walls of Omega, with Shepard close behind. The Spartan-II had ordered his team to fan out as to avoid from being

bogged down by traps. So far, the advance was going quite well. Rook and Wizard were advancing parallel of his position with a UCAD-7 Heavy and Medium. Neither forward advance units had reported contact.

The Chief pulled up the tactical map on his HUD, and received real-time information on troop movement. ADC and Cerberus had already set up jammers, rendering their zone dark.

Alongside with the UNSC, Aria's forces had formed a rough quad-dent formation. The middle two were of course John and Shepard, Rook and Wizard, with their respective compliments of drones and _Normandy_ team.

The outer two were spearheaded with Fourth Element on the left and Fifth Element on the right. Third Element would be hanging back to provide sniper support. If everything went to plan, this Op would be over in a few hours.

"Status, John?" Shepard whispered over the private COM.

"Nothing," came the reply. "We're clear."

The map minimised on the HUD, taking space in the top left corner. John turned around to take a quick glance of his accompaniment besides Shepard. There was Legion, Garrus, and Vega. Two sharpshooters and one heavy-hitter, this meant that John would have to be the second heavy-hitter, while Shepard would be the flanker.

â€|

"I've got two in the tower, and six below us," Lotus said.

Fifth Element was making their way across a catwalk which stretched across a cavernous drop between the city's skyline. There were two ADC Snipers in the tower, dressed in black and red livery armour. Below the catwalk, were six Operatives running through a weapons checklist, they were directly in the snipers' field of vision.

"Athena, Briar, take the two in the tower, on my mark." Arca ordered.

The Spartan-IVs responded and zeroed in on their targets. Blue lines crossed the team HUD, indicating line of fire.

"Ready," Palmer said.

"In position," Thorne whispered over the COM.

Quickly, Lotus and Arca slung their Ember rifles and switched to their sidearms. They threw themselves over the railings and hanged on the other side. Arca swept across the small outpost and made sure there weren't any hidden surprises waiting for them.

"We're good," he whispered to Lotus over TEAMCOM, "you take the left, I'll take the right."

"Got it."

Like a well-rehearsed move, the Operatives dropped from the catwalks and onto the landing below, crushing an ADC Operator under their heels. Their active-camo winked off.

"Mark," Arca whispered into the COMs.

The two snipers in the tower barely had a moment to respond before a bullet bore through their heads and splattered the support struts with blood and brain matter.

ADC Troopers on the landing were caught off guard when they came face to face with the UNSC's Infamous. Arca advanced forward with his pistol raised and pulled the trigger. The closest hostile's head snapped violently back as a round found its mark between his eyes. Adrian shifted his aim and took down his last target with a perfect headshot. He turned just to see Lotus finish off his last enemy.

"Clear," Lotus added, purely for effect.

The duo quickly spanned outwards and searched for anything useful. Lotus pried a headset off a dead ADC Operator, while Arca rigged a weapons cache. A civilian wouldn't be able to break past the security systems already placed on the cache, so there was little risk of collateral damage.

"We're done here," Arca said.

He moved to a support column of the overhead walkway and clambered up the metal supports with ease. Lotus followed suit, and soon, the two had re-joined the rest of their team.

"You guys done?" Palmer sighed.

Arca nodded.

Suddenly, the UNSC band burst to life. The incoming audio feed was filled with heavy gunfire and cussing.

"This is Echo-Three," Langley said, "Andrews is down! I repeat, we've got a man down! It's Osman! They've got us bogged down. Under heavy—" "

The feed was cut off by an explosion, and then nothing but static.

"Shit," Arca muttered. He keyed his COM. "Edwards, do you read? Edwards?"

No reply.

"Arca, proceed with the mission," it was the Chief. He sounded worried but was well aware of Omega's strategic importance. "We'll just have to tighten up our advance."

"Copy that. We're Oscar Mike."

Without realising it, Arca had brought his team to a halt and spun round to answer any questions. Thorne seemed the most concerned. He

wasn't green by any definitions; he was more or less along the lines of paranoid. And given what he's been through, it shouldn't come as a surprise.

"An entire Element, how does that happen?" Throne frowned.

"It's happened before," Arca muttered, recalling the memories that never seem to fade.

"So what's the plan?" Palmer asked.

Arca furrowed his eyebrows and went through the scenarios. Osman was on the ground, and that meant Bravo-Kilo was with her. There had also been a new batch of SOGs that had been deployed; no doubt one of them would be here.

No way Fourth could've survived that, too much against them.

"We'll take to the high grounds, bang into Afterlife, and hope that the Chief catches up."

****XXxxXX****

"_Lotus, come in. Lotus, respond. Dammit Bryce, are you there?"_

>-Arca raising Lotus on
TEAMCOM_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** I'm afraid that this will be my last update for a ******very****** long time, as I will undergo my final year in highschool. (I know the update was extremely shortâ€¦) The HSC is reputed to be one of the most difficult educational systems in Australia, so my updates will be very far apart.******

****If you have any questions, feel free to PM me or leave a review. If you have any questions pertaining specifically to the lore, then leave a review either in this story or in ****_**First Galactic Conflict â€œ** Recounts****_****, if possible, your questions will be moulded into the story.********

****For those of you who don't know it, FGC-R is an epistolary story, I different approach in writing style that I'm experimenting with. I aim to have that story act as a filler for LL and cover any loops in the lore. ********

****Thank you so much for reading ****_**Lost Legacy****_**** thus far.**********

47. Gallant Assassins

****A/N:** Hats off to AYSHUNAMAYSHUN for being the 1000th reviewer, and DamionKenley117 for being the 999th and 1001st reviewer.******

****â€¦|****

****I consider this chapter to be my masterpiece to dateâ€¦| more or less.****

****XXxxxXX****

_"What's Frankenstein to you?"
>-Arca_

_"A freak of nature."
>-Lotus_

_"And what did they call Spartans before they became popular?"
>-Arca_

_"Freaksâ€¦| I see where you're going with this."
>-Lotus_

_"Not quite. Did you know that Frankenstein is literally translated into 'stronghold of free men'? Did you know that the monster in _Frankenstein _is called 'The Monster', and that Frankenstein is actually the scientist who created the monster? There's some dramatic irony for you. Mary Shelley wrote the story with a post-modernist element so to blur the line between antagonist and protagonist."
>-Arca_

_"Okay, I did not just fly fifteen million miles just to get a lecture in literature."
>-Lotus_

_"Here's some food for thought. Halsey is simply Frankenstein who got it right. She's a woman who sacrificed just about everything for the Spartan-Program to make it work. Halsey and Frankenstein were the ones to push beyond the boundaries of science involving humans. Only there is one major difference between the two."
>-Arca_

_"Ones a woman and another's a man?"
>-Lotus_

_"No, that's probably coincidence. But the difference is this, Halsey did the project out of necessity, the Innies were causing a lot of hell for us. And she succeeded, the Spartans are beyond human. Frankenstein did his work out of pure ambition and drive to play god. He succeeded in part, but what he created was an abomination, which was more human than he was. Irony isn't it? The Monster being more human than Spartans? Halsey spent hours trying to make her Spartans more open to people outside the program. The Monster was forced to fend for itself and learn. And here's another kicker, the Monster and the Spartans share a similarity, they know vengeance, because Parangosky's death was not a natural one."
>-Arca_

****XXxxxXX****

****OMEGA, GOZU DISTRICT**

>CENTRE LINE " HEADING NORTH TO AFTERLIFE

John had just ordered Third Element to go support Fourth Element. He could see Langley's vitals, the man was alive, albeit barely.

"Keep pushing up!" the Spartan gestured. He pointed towards a divider that could be used as a firing position for Aria's heavy hitters.

"Wizard, Rook, status!"

"We're almost in position," Rook answered.

The forward elements had finally clashed with Aegis and Cerberus forces. Weapons fire lit up the dimly lit station as fighters roared overhead.

This was the rush of battle, where the Spartan would let training take over. John breathed in deeply, gripped his Sabre, and hurled himself over the wall. He landed with a loud thud on the metal deck below. Time seemed to slow down into a crawl for the Chief as he reached a heightened sense. The suit's systems began to kick in, augmenting reality, revealing every single threat in the vicinity.

Without hesitation, John raised his rifle and squeezed the trigger. He fired at the first read outline, and watched as it faded to grey. From the readout, he could tell he had just killed a Cerberus centurion.

He switched to his next targets with unnerving speed and accuracy, and by the time the first body had fallen, he had already scored eight kills. Realising the threat he posed, Cerberus forces concentrated their fire on him, but he was already on the move.

Rounds bit at his feet and dug deep into the decks as Cerberus soldiers tried to get a bead on him. But John was much faster. He ran around the full swing of the perimeter and popped up again on the left flank.

"There he is!" a centurion pointed, "take him down!"

An unmistakable roar left John's rifle as he aimed down the sights. The Cerberus soldiers shook violently, their bodies being pulverised and burned simultaneously. That was the beauty of hard-light weaponry; it burned while delivering a powerful kinetic load.

"That's a fucking Spartan!" an Aegis Operative cried.

"Fuck! I'm not paid enough to fight a fucking Spartan!" a woman said.

"Fall back!"

There was a reason why the Chief hadn't bothered to use cloak—he was the distraction in this attack.

"Shepard, now," he whispered through the mic.

Without warning, the entire Cerberus and Aegis defensive position was torn asunder by a powerful biotic attack. Cries of flailing soldiers were muffled as they were overwhelmed by Shepard's attack.

Like an Angel of Death from above, Jane launched herself in a stream of blue light and impacted onto the deck with a thunderous blast. Anything that was held securely to the ground was tossed about like toys.

As soon as the dust settled, any abled survivors trained their guns on her and fired. But Shepard, she had always been faster; it was in her nature as a biotic. Even without her augmentations, people had found it hard to even land a shot on her. Jane literally danced around the battlefield with a vibrant violet-blue light trailing in her wake.

Mercenaries were thrown over the railings at a flick of her wrist, men and women were crushed at the clenching of her fist.

Seeing the threat she posed, one of the defenders had called in close air support. Two Hornets and a Sparrow VTOL from ADC's arsenal roared in, guns blazing. The first salvo of rounds and missiles devastated dozens of krogans and vorchas in their bloodlust.

Shepard only managed to catch their outline before they were consumed by a fireball.

Vega and Javik shifted their fire at the birds, but the rounds splashed harmlessly on the energy shields. Shepard saw a couple of vorchas combatants run into the open with missile launchers and fired. The plumes of smoke only reached halfway before being stopped by anti-missile systems. She barely heard their cries as they were drowned out by the gunfire that was shredding them to ribbons.

"John! I need support!" Jane called into her COM.

"Coming," came the baritone reply.

The Spartan had moved up into an apartment building which commanded a great view of the courtyard below, which was held by the Cerberus and ADC.

He moved up to the window with his cloak engaged and zeroed in on the closet Hornet. His suit began a readout of the bird, it was shielded for the most part, but the turbofans were largely unprotected, an easy weakness to exploit.

The Chief shifted his aim and fired the M770. The Hornet's left engine coughed and sputtered, spewing out bits of its shredded fan. Soldiers riding on the side were hurled from their seats by the sudden lurch and fell to their deaths screaming. The engine finally jammed and exploded violently, sending the Hornet into a fatal spiral. John watched the craft slam into onto the bridge.

"One down," he said into his mike.

John liked the M770 SASR, it was far more manoeuvrable than the

Epirus, and packed a heavy punch for its size. He trained the weapon onto the Sparrow, and ran a quick scan. The gunship had no clear weakness, and was dishing out a horrendous amount of punishment.

"Draw its fire away from the rest of the group!" Cortana urged.

Cover for the attacks below was getting extremely ropey. A few shots managed to punch through whatever protection was remaining and kill a few turians and batarians.

"Got it."

The Chief fired a few shots at the Sparrow to catch the pilot's attention. The shields sparked gold as it absorbed the rounds, and the bird pivoted round. With his sharp eyes, John could see the gunner thumb the controls, unleashing a torrent of fire.

Instinctively, John threw himself onto the ground and lay flat as cloak reengaged. He quickly pushed himself off the wall and slid to the other side of the apartment. Readyng himself once again, he emerged from cover and fired again.

Annoyed and frustrated, the pilot pivoted the Sparrow again, whilst the gunner readjusted his aim. John armed his missile pack, a compartment lifted from behind his back and over his shoulder. Three plumes of bluish smoke leave the pod and trailed after the potent missiles. But despite their punch, the missiles were thwarted by the Sparrow's defensive systems.

"Chief, Sparrow's got its missiles armed!" Cortana warned.

An alarm droned inside the helmet as the HUD highlighted the point of danger. John slapped in a fresh clip into the Sabre, and felt time slow again. His ears registered the missiles firing, and as soon as he broke cover, his eyes picked up the exhaust flare. Without hesitation, he trained his sights on the lead missile and fire.

The resulting fireball washed over the missiles trailing behind it and threw them well of course. John didn't bother taking the time to see where they went, but he felt the slight tremor as they detonated.

"Shepard, take out the other Hornet," the Spartan keyed into his mike, "I'll get the UCADs."

"Copy that."

Jane launched herself from one side of the courtyard to the other, drawing the Hornet and Sparrow's fire. Heavy rounds burned the deck around her. But she was faster, and the gunners were having difficulty keeping up with her.

The Spectre vaulted over a crate, and then pivoted in mid-air. With an arm outstretched, she wrapped her biotic tendrils around the metal crate, and hurled it at the Hornet with all her might.

The pilot had just enough time to register his fate before the crate

smashed through the windscreen and knocked the bird out of the sky. The Hornet came crashing down onto the ground, its core ruptured, enveloping the immediate vicinity with searing heat.

Shepard's sharp hearing picked up the unmistakable whine of the two drones rolled in with great speed and opened fire before the pilot of the Sparrow could react. Combined fire from the UCADs drained the gunship's shields, and boiled away the armour plates. The bird exploded in a brilliant ball of flame as Achilles Missiles ripped through the hull and detonated the ammunition reserves.

Jane took cover what was left of a metal divider as burning debris from the Sparrow rained down.

"Move up!" the Commander ordered.

Her team she had brought with her broke from cover and began firing. Garrus, Thane and Legion laid waste to the defenders with their sniper skills, not once did they lift their eyes from the scope to reload.

"Threat neutralised," Legion would say, every time he picked off a high-threat target.

Krios was quiet most of the time, having said all of his prayers. But Garrus was the loudest, every so often calling out his kill. Not exactly subtle like a sniper would be. In John's position, the Turian was just a marksman, a true sniper was a bit more professional. Now that he thought about it, he had never actually encountered what a UNSC would rate as a true sniper. But stuffing away those thoughts, the Spartan refocused on the grim task at hand.

Vega moved up to the left flank and kept ADC and Cerberus pinned with suppressive fire.

Wizard and Rook who had been sent ahead earlier, were now swinging in on a pincer movement, flanking the defenders on both sides.

Aria soon arrived with the rest of her forces, wearing a smirk on her face. To her, revenge never felt so sweeter. To her, victory and Omega was within grasp. It was something Shepard pitied; Aria had no idea about Cerberus's true nature. The Asari had no idea that the UNSC's most infamous were going up against their own.

"Shepard, sorry I'm late," T'Loak said nonchalantly, walking up to Jane, "had to deal with some Adjutants on the way."

"They've escaped?" Shepard asked in a loud voice.

"Some haveâ€¦ messy fuckers. Cerberus has no idea what they're creating."

Shepard remained silent. _Or maybe they do_.

And in a few short moments, the courtyard was cleared.

John leapt down from his vantage point and landed with a dull thud as he used his thrusters to stabilise himself.

"Rook, scout out the other side of this bridge," he ordered.

"Yes sir," the Lieutenant complied. He reached for a recon drone tucked away in his pack, and threw it into the air. The RC engaged its silent rotors and soared quietly over to the other side. Feed from drone's sensors came through, allowing a multitude of information on enemy positions.

Cerberus and ADC were extremely well dug, they held a chokepoint which lay perpendicular to the main bridge way. This meant that the moment the group crossed the bridge and rounded the corner up ahead; they would be fighting an uphill battle against fortified positions, armoured vehicles and light artillery.

John went through the scenarios and method of attack. He decided that it would be best if he and Shepard go in alone for this one. Otherwise, too many people would get killed.

"What's the plan?" Jane asked, walking up to John, Aria was tailing impatiently behind. The Asari was itching to get her hands dirty with Cerberus blood. The three of them remained in the safety of a foyer as snipers on the other side of the bridge began to open up. Few of the ragtag mercenaries were trained snipers. Most of them preferred to conduct their fire fights up close and personal.

"Kill zone waiting for us around the bend," the Spartan pointed out. He relayed the drone feed to Shepard's HUD. "You and I will go spring them, Wizard and Rook will flank around like last time. Everyone else comes in with the UCADs on our mark."

"Sounds good," Jane nodded, "is the bridge rigged?"

"No explosives were detected," Cortana said over the private COM channel, while John shook his head.

Before the two left, Jane left Garrus and Thane to form up her team, while Aria manage her larger task force. Shepard remained close to John as he opted to take to the higher levels and performed cloaked glide jump.

The stealth systems managed to mask their approach, but even then, John was wary. When gliding over the chasm that separated the courtyard from the next section of Gozu district, the Spartan made sure that his flight path remained below the city skyline.

"Cortana, can you jam their systems?" John asked.

"I can do more than that," the AI said as if she was discussing the weather. "Let me see what I can do."

She began to utilise the armour's systems to tap into "nearby" interfaces.

"Communications are outâ€¦ ooh and they've got turrets and mechs."

Landing silently onto an apartment's balcony on the fourteenth floor, John swept the room with his sensors. But he knew that ONISAD's stealth systems were one of the best, which meant that they can circumvent most forms of detection. The Spartan was well aware that there could be unfriendly Arcani operating in the area as well.

He moved up to the door, and slowly pried the door open, allowing Shepard to enter first. She swept the room, making sure that there weren't any hidden surprises.

"Clear," she said, stopping in the middle of the lounge.

Engaging cloak, the two moved silently into the hallway, before moving to the rooftops.

"Rook, status," John keyed into his mike.

"Flanking from the left," came the replied, "we'll provide overwatch."

"Copy."

John edged the rooftop door open, thankful that it was a manual door, and not an automatic one. He quickly eased out of the stairway and moved out onto the roof with his weapon raised. Shepard gently shut the door behind them as she moved to the left.

Just like old times, John pondered.

"Chief, I've detected six sentries in the immediate vicinity," Cortana said.

Highlighted figures appeared on his HUD and were promptly prioritised in terms of threat analysis. John quite liked the new functionality that the GEN5 offered, full real-time tactical information.

"I've got two snipers on my side," Shepard whispered into the COM. She quietly switched silenced SMG attached to her thigh, and aimed down range, she had the snipers lined up, kill two birds with one stone. "On your mark."

"Mark."

Jane squeezed the trigger and watched in satisfaction as the two snipers' heads snapped violently to the right, spraying the roof with blood and gore.

In less than the time it took for a normal human to formulate a coherent thought, John had already sprung from cover with knives drawn. He quickly closed the gap between him and the ADC sentries, and rammed the blade into the base of the woman's skull. The blade had pierced through the protective layers of the armour and destroyed the part of the brain which managed involuntary functions. She was dead before he retracted the blade from her cranium.

Her partner was about to cry out something, only to receive a powerful stab into her chest and pierce her heart. John could hear the sickening snap of her ribcage as it caved in from the sheer force.

Four down, two more to go. The Spartan quickly lined up his aim before the reaming two sentries could react. He hurled the blade, and breathed in grim satisfaction as the knife dug into the man's helmet, killing him instantly.

The last one was dealt by Shepard swiftly before John could throw his second blade. It happened all so quickly, in just a heartbeat, six had been killed.

"Not bad," Cortana commented, "good to see you two getting along."

John said nothing while Jane gave a dry chuckle.

"Rook here, we are in position," the COMs chimed.

"Copy, target the tanks and gun positions," John ordered, "and nothing else."

"Yes sir, waiting for your mark."

The Spartan moved to the ledge of the rooftop and gazed down at the chokepoint below. He looked over to Shepard who gave him a curt nod of approval.

"Let's do this."

"After you," John said.

Jane slung her rifle onto her back and drew her sword again; it was time to go on melee. As soon she had the blade out and activated, she streaked down to the ground with a vibrant teal colour following her wake. Shepard slammed into the ground at blistering speeds with a resounding explosion. The biotic shockwave tore through the immediate area and hurled everything outward. People were broken, crates were thrown and mechs were shattered as the powerful N7 Adept tore through their ranks.

Dark Channel jumped from one person to another, allowing Shepard to create a string of biotic explosions which added more to the carnage. ADC Operators had only passive cybernetic enhancements, and a very watered down positronic brain implants. Jane barely noticed the difference between the PMC and Cerberus as she threw them into walls and at each other.

Everything was happening so fast and yet so slow for Shepard. She propelled herself around the battlefield, unleashing her full biotic abilities. Tendrils of blue and waves of teal coursed and tore through the defensive perimeter; barely a shot was fired in her direction. Everyone was just busy running.

She barely registered the fact that John and the others had opened fired, disorientating the defenders and removing their ability to retaliate. She barely noticed the auto-turrets being turned against their users. Shepard had entered a heightened state where the only things that did not concern her, did not get her attention. To her, this feeling, it felt good. It was like two minds working in unison. One would act as the information filter and the other would concentrate on execution of tasks.

Yes, Jane liked this heightened level of sense. This was not like any adrenaline rush she had experienced before, but something more. She moved around the battlefield with perfect precision, staying well clear of her allies' firing vectors. Her sword hacked, slashed and cleaved at anyone in range. Scores of enemy combatants fell by her

hand.

A rampart mech tried to take her by surprise, but Jane already knew what it planned to do, even before it began to plan its runtime execution. Shepard pivoted and slashed at the bipedal mech with a powerful biotic attack. The blade burned through its circuits and melted the armour, leaving the rampart vulnerable to the biotic ripple that trailed the sword.

Before the mech could self-destruct, Shepard blast the remains with her biotics, letting it burn harmlessly on a crate.

A couple of rounds impacted onto Shepard's shields, alerting her that there was at least one phantom in the area.

"Shepard, two Phatoms are on approach to your left, we do not have a line of fire," Cortana called.

Jane had to marvel at how valuable the AI was. She had hacked into the sentry-turrets providing additional fire support, and gave accurate real-time intel.

Shepard pivoted to her right and slashed at the phantom. The stroke was quick and smooth, cleanly melting through the armour and cooking the flesh. The second Cerberus assassin attempted to stab Jane in the back, but the Spectre was faster, and delivered a killing blow to the heart before the phantom could strike.

From above, Rook, Wizard and John selected their targets and fired. To them it was at a decent tempo, but to others, it was abnormally fast. Bullets from the sniper rifles punched through cover and found their marks. Cerberus and ADC Operators fell to the ground in quick succession, painting the deck in blood and gore.

Finally, the area was back to an eerie silence. Most of the civilians in this area had been relocated somewhere else on the station. And looters were the least of Shepard's concern.

"Aria," Jane spoke into her Omni-tool, "you're clear to come up."

"Nice work Shepard, that was faster than what I anticipated," Aria said genuinely. It was hard to tell since her tone was about the same. But it lacked in arrogance and cynicism she usually had.

John landed onto the ground next to Shepard softly. His thrusters made a low whine that was barely audible, even for augmented hearing.

"Got something?" Jane asked, judging by his body language, it looked like he did.

"Fifth Element is closing in on Afterlife. They'll be there before Ariaâ€¦"

"â€¦ and probably be gone by the time she gets there," Shepard finished.

Although it was hard to notice, Jane could tell that there was a lot of animosity from Arca and Lotus, pointed towards Parangosky. From

what Shepard had heard about the woman, she'd probably hate the former Head of ONI too.

Whatever the politics was within the Intelligence Organisation, Shepard was well aware that this was the thick of it. Aria was most definitely not going to get her little vendetta against Petrovsky. The Asari may be the Queen of Omega, and ruler of the mercenary groups, but she was in no way capable of taking ONI head on. And she sure as hell wasn't going to get her way.

ONISAD was going to get to Petrovsky first; Aria would just have to take it on the chin with this one.

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****LEFT FLANK (WEST)****

Riley James Sanderson callsign, "Sandman" had been with ONISAD-SOG for as long as Adrian had. But unlike most Operatives, Sandman had risen through the ranks of Airborne. He was the one with "more military" experience than anyone else in the division. He and his team â€" Third Element â€" were the only ones who didn't use cover names. Most of the time they were deployed for field recon and recovery.

"Langley, you still there?" Sandman keyed into his mike

"Barely," the Officer gasped. He redirected his helmet cam feed so that Riley could see what was happening. Langley had a gaping wound in his stomach, and a unit of Aegis bearing down on him. He had already managed to pick off a few PMC Operatives off already, but there were a lot more coming.

"Hold on, we're coming to you."

"Co-.." that was the last thing Langley uttered. The camera view dipped aimlessly down to the ground, revealing the fallen men of Fourth Element and their bloodied bodies. Riley heard Langley's body hit the floor, as a familiar boot stepped into view.

"Police their weapons, leave the bodies," Sandman heard Osman ordered. He heard another gunshot before the feed was cut dead. His blood ran cold, his heart ached as if it was being boiled. A conflict of emotions spread through him. Langley and no doubt the others had been double-tapped. The final bullet to the brain to make sure they don't come back.

"Shit," he muttered. Riley flicked on his COMs. "Echo-Three Actual to Echo-Five."

"Echo-Five Actual, here," Arca answered with a whisper. "What's the situation?"

"Echo-Four is down, all KIA."

"Shit. Get to them; I'll handle things on my end."

"Copy."

Osman was going to pay, dearly. Riley was going to make sure that

bitch and her lapdogs were going to live out the rest of their very short time in fear. He turned to his team members, they all shared his sentiment.

"Let's go hunting," Garad growled.

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AFTERLIFE, GOZU DISTRICT

"You can't be serious!" Petrovsky yelled furiously.

He knew they were losing, he knew that Parangosky's brilliant plan was at its end. Sure she may have ADC in her palm, but what can they do against ONI? How can they fight back at ONI? The Political Actions Group would freeze all of ADC's financial assets, while the Special Operations Group would pick off the members of the board and any major stockholder.

"I am," Parangosky said coldly. "And I am well aware of the consequences."

Oleg paced around the office, unable to accept the fact that she was ordering him to do this.

"This is insane, just surrender, it'll all be easier on us that way."

"No, Clarence," the former Admiral said. Kestrel was slightly surprised that she was using his first name. "No surrendering."

"We've lost," Gretski sighed, shaking his head. He backed onto his desk and leaned against the metal top. Suddenly, he felt uncomfortable wearing the Cerberus uniform. Ironical how it bore such a similar resemblance to the white Ceremonial Dress, the UNSC Naval Officers wore.

Parangosky shook her head. "You never understood the plan did you?"

Kestrel turned his dark brown eyes on the former Director of ONI.

"If I wasn't mistaken, you contracted Aegis to carry out an attack on Northfold," he said calmly, "you issued a kill order on Sixth Element, and by god you were close to issuing one on Arca and Sandman before. You created Cerberus as a means to monitor the galaxy. But since we were too busy dealing with the Insurrectionism, Pirates both human and non-human, and the Sangheili Uprising, all of which you ordered to be instigated. I never understood the plan because you've never told me the full picture!"

Kestrel turned to his console as he saw the display pulse. He walked over to the panel and waved his hand over it.

"General Petrovsky here," he said.

"Sir," it was a centurion, "Aria's forces are pushing us back, taking heavy casualties"

The feed was cut off by a gunshot, and then Kestrel heard rustling over the COM.

"I'm back to retake Omega, you fucker."

Gretski was well aware of Aria and Shepard's presence on Omega. It unsettled him, because of Shepard was here, that meant the Chief would be here to. And if the Chief was here, the rest of the UNSC was going to turn up sometime soon.

Although Kestrel didn't know it yet, Parangosky was no longer Head of ONI, and he never will. The bullet bored through his head, ending his life immediately. Gretski's body crumbled into a heap on the floor as blood began to flow.

"I'm sorry, Clarence, but there was no other way," Margaret said with a hint of sadness in her voice.

The man that lay dead on the floor, held so many similarities to Parangosky's deceased and beloved nephew that it hurt. It hurt for her to kill him. But she had to do it. Her plan was still salvageable. It was in one of these rare moments that she could silently grieve.

On her orders, Kestrel hadn't stationed any Cerberus soldiers inside the main area of Afterlife. No one would've heard the gunshot but her.

Many people assumed that Margaret was a cold-hearted and ruthless person. It scared her that the statement wasn't far off from the truth. Easing herself into the armchair, she kept her gaze on Clarence's lifeless body.

She felt something, a cold fire at the bottom of her chest. It was the feeling of guilt and torment. She slid the pistol back into the holster and continued to just remain lost in her own thoughts.

For the first time, in a very long time, Margaret finally allowed her human nature to overwhelm her. The side of her capable of self-evaluation began a string of berating.

She knew she had let her own personal vendettas get in the way of ONI so many times, and it usually ended up in someone getting killed. She was well aware of her hated status amongst the ranks of Section Zero and ONISAD. She was well aware of how much suffering she had placed on Essingdon for fear that he would turn out like his mother.

The "boy" never deserved that much grief, not after how much he had given. Now that she thought about it, Halsey was right about her, she had always been right about her, right about everything.

Pulling back on her calculative nature, Parangosky rose from the chair, and opened the COM channel.

"Serin, pull your people back, enact tertiary contingency plans, we're leaving."

Star charts and maps of Omega's surrounding areas, began to ping. Parangosky could see the rising number of slipspace portals opening.

Group-7 was here, and it was then, Margaret knew that she was no longer part of the UNSC chain of command. She had been ousted without her knowledge, and that could only mean one thing. UNSC High Command wanted her dead. The Admirals and Generals were growing back their own balls, and now they were ready to strike back at the once most feared woman.

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GOZU DISTRICT, UNSC REINFORCEMENT LZ

The Osprey touched down on the landing zone in Omega, and as Captain Sammi "Huntress" Salas stepped off the bird, a chilling sensation spread throughout her body. She always hated that feeling, the feeling that something would go wrong. Pure superstition of course, but she always got that feeling before a mission that would go to shit, and in times like these, she wasn't going to stow away that feeling. She was going to be cautious and have her team always double check the shadows.

"Dubbo!" Sammi called to her Sergeant Major.

"Yes ma'am," he answered, turning to face.

"Grab a squad and move to the left!"

"Copy that."

The ODS'Ts began to move out and headed towards their designated objectives. Intel given to them from Ninth Element had helped paint a clear image of Omega, and it was clear to Huntress that her task was to recover ONISAD Operatives.

"Alright gents, we're here to bring a couple of spooks home," she said to her unit. She could hear the murmurs and grumbles of annoyances from her people as they realised they had to play babysitter.

"Move out," Sammi ordered.

Huntress allowed the drones to go first, sweeping the area of any stragglers and wounded. So far everything seemed good as Hunter 5-7 proceeded via the pre-planned route which would lead straight to Afterlife.

"Wonder where the Aegis guys are," Dubbo commented over TEAMCOM.
"Everything is too quiet."

Salas frowned as she felt that strange sensation run down her spine, and an icy hand grip her chest. Something was awfully wrong. It shouldn't be, but something just felt off.

"Something wrong ma'am?" Chips asked.

"This place doesn't feel right," Huntress said in an uncomfortable tone.

She had barely been here for more than five minutes and already, she had a feeling that something would go horribly wrong. War wasn't like a romanticised story where things happened in a spectacular fashion.

There was always something that would jump out and catch someone by surprise.

"Keep an eye out for the Adjutants, spooks say their like the Flood," Salas warned.

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RIGHT FLANK (EAST) â€" OUTSIDE OF AFTERLIFE

In all the times that Adrian had assaulted hollowed out asteroid bases, there had always been one defining quality that always stood out â€" they were like cities built in a hollow shell â€" where it was possible to see the entire settlement from the highest tower.

He had ordered his team to fan out over the roof tops and mark any threats. Unbeknownst to Aria, Arca had told Sixth Element to proceed towards the heart of Gozu district and instigate a riot. Although it was a cold tactic, Adrian was willing to sacrifice the scum of the galaxy to get a kill shot on Osman and Parangosky. It was how he was made.

"Echo-Three, sit rep," the Paramilitary Officer said into his mike.

"Approaching Afterlife VIP section, we're right under you."

"Stay frosty, these are the guys that jumped Fourth."

"We'll get Bravo Kilo," Sandman growled.

Another voice entered the channel, it was Carbon. "So how is this going to play out?"

ONISAD generally operated in the dark with minimal electronic and physical signatures. They were old school in that sense, but it had saved their lives so many times. That was why they consistently radioed in their positions.

"Where are you?"

"West side of Afterlife," the irony of the answer was not lost on the Operatives.

"Sixth, go through the front, we'll cover you and then follow in. Third, keep the ground level clear and make your way up."

Acknowledgement lights flashed on the display. The Operative ran his eyes along the area. The same rooftop he was on had two Aegis sentries monitoring the rioters who had assembled below. The PA system was constantly telling them to disperse, but it looked like they weren't going anywhere anytime soon. The Paramilitary Officer then scanned Afterlife, there were no detectable traps, the front entrance was well fortified and the defenders dug in. And above the 'Afterlife' sign, was the Cerberus Emblem rotating proudly.

"I need a distraction," Arca whispered to his friend.

"Isn't the rioting crowd, distraction enough?" Palmer asked.

"Don't worry," Lotus smirked, "I got your distraction."

The Operative sprinted off at the two unwary sentries gazing down at the riot below.

"Bend it like Beckham!" he roared.

"Oh shit," Arca muttered.

Time seemed to slow down to a comical rate. Lotus closed in and brought back his right leg as if he was playing soccer. The ADC Operator was not wearing a full helmet, the look on his face could be described as pure shock as an Arcani de-cloaked in front of him. Lotus unwound his leg and unleashed a powerful kick.

Arca winced as he heard the groin plate crack. The unfortunate ADC Operator was sent flying into the air and off the elevated platform, reeling end over end. His buddy barely had a chance to react before he was thrown screaming to his death.

With their augmented hearing, everybody heard the splat that stoped the screaming.

"Window's open," Thorne said.

Rioters and the defenders began to clash. Krogans and Vorcha hurled themselves against Cerberus and ADC, some were torn apart by heavy gunfire, others came in close enough to use their shotguns effectively.

The people of Omega were heavily unorganised and ill-trained. A large number of their shots went wide, while Aegis and Cerberus Operatives managed to hold their ground and slaughter dozens of rioters at a time.

Odds seemed to tip for the defenders even further when two Atlas Mechs dropped down, and unleash hell on the attackers.

Arca turned to face and said, "Athena, Briar, stay here and cover us."

A brief nod of acknowledgement was given, and the two parted to set-up firing positions.

"Let's do this," Lotus whispered.

Using their thrusters, Arca and Lotus silently touched down on the main deck below

"Light 'em up."

Thorne and Palmer commanded an excellent vantage point over Afterlife. The moment Arca had given them the green-light; they opened fire with everything they had. Plumes of smoke trailed in the wake of Achilles missiles from Thorne's pack. The projectiles found their marks on Sentry Turrets and autocannons, ripping them apart with thunderous force.

"That got their attention!" Palmer said, ducking behind cover.

The defenders shifted their fire at the two Spartan-IVs, having identified them as the greater threat than the squabble below.

"At least the rioters aren't running," Thorne retorted.

Having seen the display, the rioters stood their ground and pressed on their attack.

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Going through the front was never conventional, despite how conventional it sounded, it was quite unconventional.

Sixth Element had already left a trail to climb after to avoid the well-entrenched guards at the front door, while still allowing access into the foyer.

Lotus and Arca remained cloaked as they glided down the hallway, lit by the video reel of fires and the Cerberus emblem.

"We're in position," Sandman said over the COM.

Members of Sixth Element uncloaked themselves and had stacked up by the doors, ready in waiting.

"Go in on three," Arca said.

Like a textbook breach and clear, the Operatives aligned themselves in optimal fire-and-manoeuve positions. The doors pried open and quickly the men moved in to the main area like a well-choreographed sequence.

As Arca had predicted, the place looked like a makeshift command and control centre in a nightclub. It was still dimly lit by the red theme of the Queen before.

"Clear," Carbon whispered.

"I've got nothing," Oxide said.

Adrian wanted to ask Sixth about so many questions, they were right there, right in front of him. But not focusing on the job would get good people killed. It annoyed the Operative a bit, having the answers so close yet so far away. It was a good thing Sixth had forwarded whatever they could on Cerberus to Ninth, whom would've forwarded it to ONI.

One of the doors to the far right parted open, allowing Third to enter.

"Ah, hello there, Robin Hood," Lotus greeted Riley cheerily, and pointing towards the compound bow that was slung across his back.

"It's Sandman."

"Understoodâ€| Mr Hood," Lotus said with a grin.

"Knock it off, Lotus," Arca reprimanded. He moved towards the central

spire of the room and swept the area. There was nothing out of the ordinary_, just a few inactive shield generators and consoles.

The Operative switched COM channels. "Chief, we're in Afterlife."

"Situation?"

"We're good for now, no one is inside. Cerberus and Aegis are busy with the crowds."

A ping on Arca's HUD revealed that someone else had entered the channel.

"What do we have gentlemen?" Keyes asked, he sounded stressed and tired. Humans these days slept to give their minds a rest. The Head of ONI sounded as if he was going to drop at any given moment.

"Afterlife is clear, HVTs have bailed."

"I've got something here," Carbon said, looking at the upper lounge, which everyone assumed to be where the head would reside.

"What is it?" Sandman asked.

"Body."

The feeds were updated and outlined a corpse lying near a desk. The Operatives and ONI managed to get a video link from Carbon's camera as he moved up the stairs. He rounded onto the platform and stopped at the body clad in white uniform. The console was covered in blood and brain matter.

"Shit, it's Clarence," Ozone swore.

"Looks like someone clipped him from behind," Oxide added.

"I'll see what we can get out of the systems," Carbon said, moving to an undamaged computer on the desk.

His fingers danced across the keyboard, and he waved his palm over the interface console. The monitor sparked to life.

_"Hello gentlemen," _a sinister voice said, it was Osman.

"Shit," Lotus swore.

â€|

CENTRAL APPROACH TO AFTERLIFE

Sammi had also been listening on the banter between the ONISAD Operatives. She had been granted by Keyes after all. They sounded calm, collected and professional. And the fact that they pretty much managed to make it to Afterlife without much incident, it scared her a bit. But she was also well aware that a team got pounced by rogue elements.

"Captain," it was Commander-117. The most legendary figure in the

UNSC. He was a lot taller than Huntress had imagined, and his synthesised voice was very unnerving. It was deep, hollow, lacking in emotion but held a hint of life within. Sammi knew that it was all psychological, the voice, the armour made it so. He walked with such grace, fluidity and precision that it was beyond human and machine. The Spartan was like a predator, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

"Yes sir?" Salas answered, looking at the gold visor.

"Fan your people out, and bring the dropships in close, we may need air support."

"Copy that sir," Huntress complied.

She watched the Spartan turn round and talked to his comrade. Salas knew instantly who the second person was, it was Commander Shepard. The black and red N7 livery was hard to miss. Sammi had done her homework, and knew all of Shepard's accomplishments.

Switching to the COM channels, she called in air-support.

"This is Hunter Five-Seven, requestion close air-support and a flight of Ospreys, over."

"Copy that, Hunter Five-Seven," the Command Operator said, "sending you them now, over."

The group moved along the main pathway, over a long bridge. Omega could be seen in the distance, the central spire providing lighting for the entire skyline. It was like a permanent evening here. Which Sammi thought was nice but this place is less than satisfactory.

Transports of various kinds belonging to the mercenary army flew in low, avoiding sporadic AA fire from Cerberus and Aegis. A squadron of Firehawks flew overhead and unleashed a volley of autocannon fire, shredding the metal deck into molten Swiss cheese.

The UNSC hadn't bothered to deploy armour, Omega was too dense. Instead, ground-support came from the UCADs.

Huntress decided to listen back in on the ONISAD Operatives, and opened another COM relay to switch back to the channel.

"Shit," a familiar voice swore.

The central spire split asunder with a powerful explosion. Instantly, the entire skyline went dark. Sammi could hear low rumbles and ear splitting cracks coming from above.

"Watch out!" A Krogran roared, seconds before being crushed by falling rocks.

The upper areas of the cavern rippled as fireballs tore through its shells. Sammi's mind clicked, and instantly knew what was happening. Contingency plans had been enacted, it was time to bail. Another explosion shook the station, and a bluish field swept through the area, frying anything that wasn't protected against EMPs. The station lurched, buckling anything that was bolted into the ground.

Everything that could possibly go wrong had just happened.

Omega was being pulled.

****â€|****

In the heartbeat that followed after Osman's recorded message, John knew something was wrong before Lotus had even opened his mouth. The explosion that soon followed, confirmed his worst fears.

Omega was purged into darkness, and pulled out of orbit. Dull thumbs and the screech of metal indicated that the station was crashing into nearby asteroids.

"Cortana, status!"

"We've been hit by an EMP of Forerunner origin," the AI replied. "Omega's main power grid has been cut; Keyes is ordering a full retreat. The station is on a collision course with Bindur."

Real-time intel was being fed directly onto John's HUD. Trajectory projection from Group-7 showed that there was some kind of slipspace anchor link between the planet, Bindur and Omega. And now the anchor was "retracting", pulling the station with it.

"What about the teams?"

"They've gone dark," Cortana said worriedly. "We need to pull out."

"Not without them," John said sternly.

"Chief, this whole place is coming apart!" the AI berated, "they're at ground zero, I don't know if they're even alive!"

"What about Palmer and Thorne?"

"They're alive and circling Afterlife in a Greyhawk. Chief, there's nothing we can do for the rest."

The Spartan swore silently, and ordered the evac.

****â€|****

****A FEW LEVELS BELOW, AFTERLIFE****

Bells rang inside Arca's ear. He knew he should be dead, a trap like that should've killed him. But it didn't. It was sloppy work. Nonetheless his body was on fireâ€| literally. Stunned into full readiness, the Operative began to roll around in order to snuff the flames. He had been coated in a flammable residue, and it didn't look like it wasn't going to go out any time soon. Quickly, he tore off his ammo harness and threw them into the farthest corner. A few seconds later, hundreds of rounds went off and ricochet of the walls. But thankful no one got hit.

His systems were barely functional; an array of error reports flooded his HUD, as he attempted to pull himself of the ground. Everyone's thruster packs were out of commission, shields were dead, sensors

barely functional, grav-hooks offline and medical systems were cold. The only things working were the FOF tags, COMs and torches.

Not again, he said silently to himself. _Not fucking this again._

Arca looked around what was left of the place, and gazed upwards. The entire place had collapsed on itself, buried in meters of metal and rock. Only sparking wires and non-electrical lighting lit the area. He felt the need to laugh at that, the worst place in the galaxy had safety precautions like non-electrical lights.

Steadying himself on a jutting metal beam, the Operative flicked on the VISR.

"Fuck," he swore.

Adrian moved as fast as his legs could carry him, to the smouldering bodies off to his right. The moment he got to them, he realised that Carbon and Ozone had been the first killed in the explosion. He could see their blood splattered on their transparent visors. Emergency packs had ruptured, and spewed contaminated biofoam onto the charred floor.

But a body stirred. Arca quickly ambled over to Oxide, and bulled up his biofeed. The Operative had major internal tissue damage, but he would live.

"Oxide!" Arca called, "Oxide! You hear me?"

"Yeah," came a weak reply. "I can hear bells ringing."

"C'mon."

Arca hauled the Operative to his feet, and handed him his rifle.

"Check the others."

Oxide nodded and jogged over to Third Elements position. They had copped a fair brunt of the blast as well.

"Garad and Bishop are KIA. Sandman is alive, butâ€¦| shit he's fucked up."

Arca turned to see Riley, and saw that he had a bloodied rebar impaled into him. Oxide quickly grabbed whatever biofoam he could and injected into the wound. Riley twitched and shot back from unconsciousness.

"Shit, that stings!" he swore.

Lotus stirred from his spot, and pushed a metal panel off from him. He was well aware of the lacerations on his back. CTS-Suit was not made for encounters like these.

"Oh god fucking damn it," the Operative swore gratuitously. There was a shard of metal embedded in his left shoulder. He grasped the offending item and yanked it with a _shick_ sound. Blood slowly

flowed down his armour, but eventually stopped as the Nanites formed containment barriers.

"Elements, are you there?" it was Palmer over the COM. "Elements, respond."

"We're here," Lotus groaned, "half of us anyway."

"Casualties?"

"Four dead, the rest wounded," Arca replied.

"Can you move?" Palmer asked with genuine concern.

"Yeah."

"Well get moving to the evac point. Something's scrambled our sensors."

"Copy," Arca sighed. "What's happening?"

"Intel says that we're getting some kind of interference, Forerunner Origin, andâ€¦"

"Parangosky had some contingencies," Riley finished. His mind was swirling in a myriad of emotions. He felt guilty for the deaths of his people, because he had been outwitted. Cerberus had placed charges even ONISAD couldn't detect. Now, good people had gotten killed over it. He turned his grief into angerâ€¦ he wanted revenge.

"That's not all," Palmer continued, "Omega is going to crash into Bindur."

"Come again?" Arca asked.

"Omega's anchored to Bindur like Infinity was with Requiem. Sensors didn't pick up the anchor until after the EMP array. You guys have got to bail now!"

"Copy that."

The remaining survivors regrouped at the centre of the room, in the midst of rocks and burning rubble. There was a solemn mood in the air, and repressed anger hung like a dead smell. Someone was going to pay dearly for this.

An inhuman growl was heard from one of the darkened hallwaysâ€¦ Adjutants. The Reaper creations of Cerberus glided into the area with their grotesque figure, and roared.

"Oh fuck me sideways," Lotus growled. He was really starting to get sick of this, and began to understand how Arca and Greystone had felt.

"Okay, Oxide, get Sandman to the evac point, we'll cover you," Arca said.

Wordlessly, the two complied. They didn't want to leave their two

comrades behind, but they had to. They were ONISAD after all, and rationality led the way.

"You better be behind us," Riley coughed.

"Get him out of here," Adrian said softly to Oxide.

The Operative nodded, and began to help Sandman out of a clear exit. "I'll leave a trail you guys can follow."

â€|

Sarah tried to keep her breath under control; she was worried as hell, and could see that Thorne was just as equally anxious. She had known plenty of ONISAD Operatives for a long time; Arca and Lotus were no exception. But over the course of a few short weeks, she had built a special bond with them. They had opened her eyes to the true nature of the world, and revealed to her that there was more to the people behind the optics.

They Greyhawk pilot made another pass over Afterlife, or what was left of it. Palmer had to hand it to Hawker; he was one of the gutsiest pilots she had ever met. By now, most pilots, Special Ops included, would've bugged out of the hot-zone. But instead, he remained in position, waiting for the rest of ONISAD to appear.

"I'm making another pass," he said, "but the air's getting pretty thin out here. We gotta leave in ten or else we won't make it."

The dropships swerved as it narrowly dodged a falling chunk of rock and debris from above.

"Copy that."

The side doors were open, revealing the torn scape of the city below. Brilliant spires of fire leapt from the city, spewing columns of smoke into the air.

"Palmer!" Thorne called, "we've got hostiles inbound!"

It felt strange for Gabriel to call Sarah by her name rather than rank. But he was paramilitary now, and certain privileges do apply.

The Commander looked down onto the rubble below, and the misshapen buildings that stood around it. Adjutants were closing in on the area, anyone who was still alive on the ground were being picked off by the horrific creations.

She could hear the fearful screams of men and women being torn apart by sheer brute force.

"I got something on my sensors," Thorne said. "It's Oxide and Sandman, two hundred meters east of us."

"I got them," Hawker said.

The Greyhawk came in low over the ridgeline with guns blazing. The heavy machine guns ripped through the adjutants with relative ease, shredding apart the dark teal creatures.

Oxide and Sandman emerged from a torn and partially collapsed hallway. They looked worse for wear with their armour battered and warped. The Operatives carried pistols in their hands, firing at anything that moved with unnerving accuracy for wounded men at least.

Adjutants crumpled under the volley of well-placed headshots as the two made their way to the awaiting Greyhawk. Bits of debris were hurled into the air by the billowing engines.

Thorne jumped off the dropship and had his weapon raised, providing covering fire. He managed to bring down a handful of adjutants before the two ONISAD Operatives reached him.

"Easy, easy," Oxide repeated as they lifted Sandman inside.

"Where are the others?" Palmer yelled.

"They're coming," Oxide answered as he got onboard.

The LZ was beginning to swarm again, forcing Hawker to take off and perform another gun run. But another explosion tore through the station, and to Palmer's horror, a torrent of rocks came crashing down.

Hawker quickly threw dropship into a steep bank, aiming away from Afterlife.

"Shit that was close," he breathed.

Sarah looked back at the remains of the nightclub, and felt an icy hand grip her heart. The rocks had just come down on top of the place. If there was an escape for Arca and Lotus, it wasn't here.

"Palmer," it was the Chief, "sit rep?"

Sarah answered her comlink. "We still got two people down on the ground. We're trying to get them out."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Don't take any unnecessary risks; bring them home if you can."

Visibility was severely diminished. All the lights had winked out, and all that was left was uncontained fires and the soft glow of unrefined Eezo in the mines above.

"Ground is getting pretty close," Hawker said. "We need to pull out soon."

â€|

Arca sprinted through the hallways deteriorating station. Catwalks and platforms were dislodged from their welded stations as Omega shook violently. The Operative spun round and fired an Ember Rifle he'd claimed from a fallen member of his division. The lead adjutant trailing him shuddered and twitched under the hail of fire as its head was shredded off.

Lotus quickly scooped up a sizeable metal beam and hurled it back into the horde chasing them. He was received with a satisfying thud and a pained howl as the beam found its mark.

Lights flickered and panels sparked as the supports struts groaned and screeched. It was still a miracle that the artificial gravity was still online.

"Watch your head!" Lotus bellowed.

A red support column collapsed to Arca's right, narrowly missing his head by mere inches. The Operative's AR systems had taken damage, and the nanites were having trouble keeping his suit operational. His HUD was scrambled and washed in static, forcing him to rely on his eyes and hearing, now more than ever.

Explosions tore through the station; a few shockwaves were too concentrated for comfort. Adrian could feel the vibrations roll under his feet. It was like running through an insane obstacle course where everything shifted constantly, and there was no clear line of sight on the objectives. With his HUD out of commission and his visor cracked, the Operative was forced to go by ear which he absolutely hated.

It was impossible to maintain his bearings, the entire area was coming down all around him. Viewports that remained unobstructed revealed the Omega skyline be crushed by falling supports and asteroid segments.

The physics didn't make sense, but then it didn't have to in the conventional sense. Something was warping the area drastically. Industrial production buildings crumbled and exploded, spewing out burning wreckage that light up the darkened sky. Omega was now a crumbling, burning hell hole.

"We have a problem, guys," Palmer drawled. "The exit had collapsed; you need to find another way out."

Nothing else was said, but the link remained opened. The two Operatives were suddenly aware that their still operational feed was being transmitted to the rest of their team.

"Hang left!" Arca gestured. The right path was blocked.

He leapt off the catwalk and soared through the air. His fingers brushed along the wall before wrapping around a hold. Using the momentum from the jump, Arca hurled himself onto the other side, and waited for Lotus to reach him safely.

Giving each other a quick nod, the two ran down the crumbling hallways and across the balconies, narrowly avoiding falling debris.

Lotus un-holstered his sidearm and fired at an adjutant, which tried to make the jump, but the force from the bullets dropped the creature into the chasm below. The Operative ejected the spent clip and slid in a fresh one. He kept his sights trained on the gap he had just came from, and thankful for the positronic brain implants. If it wasn't for them, the adjutants would've caught up to the two a long time ago.

"Athena, how bad is it up there?" Arca asked.

"Pretty."

"Wave off then, we'll find some way else out."

There was a long pause on the other end; Adrian could swear he heard Palmer gulp and breath rapidly. He knew that she was uncomfortable with abandoning people; it wasn't in her nature to do so. No matter how arrogant he knew her to be, she always came back for the people who fought beside her.

"Copy that," she breathed. He could hear it in her voice, the anguish of leaving people behind.

"Where to now?" Lotus asked.

They shouldn't be running, none of them should be moving for that matter. But here they were, trying to shrug off the explosion and perform parkour through a burning station.

Arca recalled the communiques about UNSC reinforcements. "Turn our FOF tags on, keep our channels public, and hail someone. We'll make a run for the UNSC LZ."

"Better plan the most," Lotus said with a shrug.

The two continued their way through service tunnels that were not on the map. But it really didn't matter, with their sensors out cold, the map was near useless. There was no point of reference in the tunnels. It was clear that this route was for emergency exits and escapes.

"This way," Arca gestured, his helmet torch lighting the dark. "Watch your six."

Running down the hallways and leaping over obstacles, the two finally received an incoming transmission.

"This is Super Five-Six, you boys need a lift?" a woman said with a slight cultivated Australian accent.

"Affirmative," Arca said, relieved.

"Keep moving one hundred meters north, then take a left, you'll reach an opening, we'll be waiting for you there. Out."

"Thanks," Arca breathed, he turned to Lotus as they ran. "We're getting out of here."

Their footfalls thumped down the tunnels as they ran for their lives. Explosions rumbled in the distance, sending shockwaves throughout the station. The whole place was deteriorating at an even faster rate. A feeling of hope and elation began to drown out Adrian's fears. They were going to make it.

"Something's on our six," Lotus said. He quickly turned round and shot the chasing adjutants, unleashing a barrage of armour piercing rounds. The first creature shuddered and came to a screeching halt on

the ground.

"Come on!" Arca beckoned.

Lotus turned around, forgoing the remaining horde, and followed Arca.

Adrian sprinted and hanged left, leaping onto the awaiting Osprey. The ODS'Ts stood aside, giving him room as he turned back to face Lotus. He could see ghostly blue blobs streak past the opening, and could tell that the adjutants were hurling biotic fields.

"Incoming!" an ODS'T yelled.

Arca looked up and felt everything run cold. It seemed as if time decided to slow down to a painfully slow rate.

"Bryce! Get the fuck out of there!" Adrian roared.

A large rock section came tumbling down, forcing the pilot to bank wildly. Arca fell back into the hold of the dropship, and felt a sharp pain spread across his back. But he didn't care. He scrambled back to the open side door, and felt a hot prickling sensation run down his back. Despair and hopelessness claimed him as he saw the collapsed exit.

"No, no, no, nonononononono," he stuttered. "Bryce, are you there! Bryce respond!"

Static, nothing but static.

"He's not going to answer," a voice said. It was a familiar voice, one that invoked anger inside him. He could feel his heart burn as he realised who it belonged to. "Don't worry, you'll be joining him too."

Gunshotâ€| Adrian felt a sharp pain spread across his body, his insides burned like wild fire. The sheer force from the shotgun hurled him out of the hold. He felt his stomach rise as he screamed in defiance. He watched as the ground filled out his vision. He tried to stabilise himself, but he had no thrusters, no shields.

Not like this, he said to himself. _Not like this_.

The last thought that entered his mind before was; _why did they wait?_

Adrian's world went dark as he hit the ground.

****XXxxXX****

_"You just don't get it do you? ONISAD lost seven guysâ€| SEVEN from PAG and SOG, to get my mother back. SEVEN men you will never meet! Seven men you spat on. The ones that made it back home, are dead men walking. Funny that you take orders from head bitch of ONI without question but you will spit on men who made sure that your home will not be blown up by some Innies, or steamrolled by an unknown. Do you realise how much shit we're in?"

>-(Formerly) LTCOL Doctor Essington Dominic

Keyes_

_"Orders are orders Keyes, I just can't believe you sent them after me."

>-Commander Sarah Palmer_

_"'You're a soldier, you're expendable!' Is what you would say, same thing applies. Halsey, the brightest mind in the UNSC is not! Hurts doesn't it? Knowing that a 'war-criminal' is invaluable and you're not. The moment I heard about the hit, what the hell was I supposed to do? Make a phone call? Besides, you were out of the ship, and Lasky did what he could. You should've listened to him, Palmer!"

>-(Formerly) LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic
Keyes_

_"Orders are fucking orders Keyes, what the fuck was I supposed to do!"

>-Commander Sarah Palmer_

_"Weren't you so interested in the politics of ONI? Read a fucking book! Parangosky and Osman were always at odds with my mother. And guess what? You signed up to the side that everybody fucking hates! You literally forced her onto the other team! Do you have any idea how much shit we are in? We are going up against the brainchild of the Spartan Program, who probably hates me, now! She probably thinks that I was part of the committee that ordered the hit!"

>-(Formerly) LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic
Keyes_

_"Keyes, I don't have time for a student with teacher issues."

>-Commander Sarah Palmer_

_"Fuck it Sarah! Halsey is now out for blood! Take a good fucking guess what's going to happen. We are royally fucked! ONISAD lost seven guys for nothing. Feel good for getting a pat on the back from Osman? Good, because that's all the handouts you're probably gonna get from here on out. Here's a fucking tip. When the SOGs are aroundâ€| watch your back. They're holding you accountable for seven men."

>-(Formerly) LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic
Keyes_

_"What are they going to do? Rape me? **[laughs]** I'll rip their dicks off if they touch me. And if you send them after meâ€|"

>-Commander Sarah Palmer_

_"I don't need to; besides that's not their styleâ€| they'll burn your word and make you watch. You cost them seven men, and they have more than enough free time for a little vendettaâ€| Just know that Halsey is now probably gunning for you, and ONISAD won't stop her."

>-(Formerly) LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic
Keyes_

[Shortly after the "betrayal" of Doctor Catherine Halsey was realised]

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** Two more years scientists, you have two more years to get me my hoverboard.**

****Btw,** I've been sent certain requests, asking what Commander Shepard looks like. We'll say no more. The story _Trust_ has her image as the cover. For those of you don't know it, _Trust_ is sort of a side dish story to _Lost Legacy_.**

****Anyway,** please review and tell me what you think. I live of it. My statement stands, this is my masterpiece to date.**

48. Forlorn

****A/N:** Although ****_**The Thursday War**_**** has received good reviewsâ€¦ I am nonetheless sceptical after having taken my fair share of morality beatings from Traviss's work. I may read it, but do forgive me if I miss certain lore from the Bravo Kilo trilogy.**

****XXxxXX****

"_Four years ago, Kilo-Five dropped off the grid, and started calling themselves Bravo Kilo. ARG reported sightings of them in redzones. We sent in SOGs to investigate. However, Bravo Kilo was tipped off and created a trap. They kidnapped ARG Operative Corona and held her as bait. We lost Second Element, Third Element, Three Echo and Three Bravo. I wonder how things would've been if we hadn't transferred Naomi back to the Twos. Maybe she would've stopped Bravo Kilo, or maybe she would've joined them."

>_**-(Formerly) LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic
Keyes**_

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD AN OSPREY, TERMINUS SYSTEMS, LEAVING OMEGA****

"We've got a live one," Salas said, looking at the scanners' feed.

John cursed at himself, swore at himself, and berated himself. He couldn't believe he neglected to do one simple thing, one simple thing that would've saved lives. He forgot to verify the Osprey that was picking up the remaining two ONISAD Operatives, and now because of that, one was half-dead and the other was off grid.

He saw it all on the feed, watched Arca and Lotus run for their very lives with adjutants chasing them. He watched them run, only for one to be shot in the back, and the other crushed by rubble.

When Adrian had fallen off the dropship, he fell down several levels but his tag was still online and transmitting his vitals. Bryce on the other hand, well, his tag went offline the moment the station collapsed right on top of him.

"Cortana, ETA on collision," Chief asked.

"Calculating, five minutes."

John was about to say something but the AI cut him off.

"Chief, the station's deteriorated to the point we can't get close—we're going to have to wait it out."

"Relay the order for all available dropships to loiter," the Spartan ordered.

The AI complied. All Ospreys that hadn't yet reached an awaiting ship, or didn't have any wounded on them, altered their course.

"Chief, look at that!" Cortana pointed. There wasn't a hardlight platform lying around on the Osprey, so the AI was forced to highlight the point of interest.

****XXxxxXX****

****BINDUR, OMEGA, TERMINUS SYSTEMS****

Adrian took in a deep breath for air. His chest rose and fell as he came back to the living. His armour had revived him. The nanites had repaired his body as much as they could, but without the sufficient resources or biomass, there wasn't much they could do. He groaned in pain, his face contorted and his fist clenched as he pulled himself free from a rebar that snared his legs.

Suit integrity "moderately damaged
>Repairs "60%; Suit now capable of operating in vacuum
Shields
"minimal functionality
>Current location "unknown
Running diagnostics on user_

His breathing began to slow down and the dots in his vision cleared, allowing him to collect his thoughts. His back felt torn, but it was no longer bleeding, that was usually a good sign. Arca's HUD began to display his bio-readout, and it wasn't looking good. Catalyst rounds were embedded inside of him, and one had grazed past his skull and took out his cam. If he hadn't moved when he heard Osman's voice, he would've been killed. Adrian had years of training and experience to thank for that reflex.

User integrity: critical; but stable

Adrian ignored the following messages on his HUD. His body was stable and he could still move, that was good enough for him. Only though, he was moving, someone was dragging him.

"It's okay," Bryce said, breathing heavily. "I got you."

He felt pain spread through his body like wildfire, Catalyst rounds were usually impeded by the positronic and nanite implants, but still effects were devastating. Adrian tried to keep his breathing under control to reign in the burning sensation.

"Where are we?" the Operative asked weakly.

"Inside of Bindur," Bryce answered. "Station slowed, but we still crashed. Kinda like Requiem."

He pulled Adrain away from the burning wreckage that was once Omega. Millions of people were still aboard the station when the retreat had been called. Many that survived were either trapped beneath the rubble, killed on impact, or scrambling out of the ruins.

Easing Adrian onto a boulder which lay at an outcrop overlooking the crashsite, Bryce began to administer whatever painkillers they had left.

"Thought you were dead," Adrian muttered.

"Takes more than that to kill me," Bryce grinned. "Is your feed still broadcasting?"

Adrian pointed to the shattered optics over his left eye.
"Broadcasting on secondary."

The Operative took in another deep breath as stimulants and painkillers flooded his bloodstream. The pain was still there, but he could ignore it now. He could move under his own strength now.

"You good?" Bryce asked, hoisting Adrian up to his feet.

The Operative nodded.

"Here take this," Arca was handed a Cerberus Harrier. It packed a decent punch and recoil wasn't too bad.

"Come, this," the transmission was choppy and filled with static, but Adrian could make out who it was.

"Chief, you're breaking up, say again!"

"Arca, status!"

"Lotus and I have made landfall, we're finding a safe place to hold up for now."

"Copy that, hang tight, we're coming in."

The link was promptly terminated as the two Operatives climbed up a hillside to the summit. Upon reaching the top in a few minutes, Arca and Lotus took up defensive position amongst the rocks and trees that covered the mesa.

"COM working?" Adrian asked.

"No," the reply came.

Sweeping back and forth over the insanely large crash site, Adrian could see the survivors scramble from the wreckage and regroup with their factions. And just like that, the fighting resumed all over again.

Omega may have crashed into the heart of Bindur but something inside the planet had slowed the station's descent into hell. Though, Adrian really didn't care. He and Bryce were still alive, and right now, it was all that mattered.

"Oh fuck!" Lotus swore, he pointed out a cluster of heavy fire. Cerberus and Aegis Troopers were being overwhelmed by a firestorm of gunfire.

Arca shifted his gaze. "Shit!"

The Operative quickly switched on his COM. "Are you getting this!"

"Oh my god," said a familiar feminine voice on the other end.

"Enact contingency protocols now! Forget about us!"

"We're already on approach," the Chief said sternly. His voice said that he wasn't going to leave a man behind. Adrian knew why, he had read the files the first time around.

"Plans?" Bryce asked.

The air began to fill with frantic screams and sporadic gunfire. Stray rounds came a little too close for comfort. A sickening feeling spread across Adrian's body as he saw a sea of rotten pale greenish yellow surge through the ruins.

The clash between desperate slum constructions and superb Forerunner architecture was a powerful one that only seemed to enhance the terrifying effect of the Flood. Spires in the distance began to shudder and surrender to gravity.

How long have they been here? Arca wondered. Was this all on convoluted and insane trap? It sure felt like it. Nothing was logical in the conventional sense when the Parasite came out to play.

"We got contact!" Lotus warned.

Flood forms were crawling up the mesa, forcing the two Operatives to open fire. Some of the combat forms were assimilated combatants from Omega. Others were pure forms, probably as old as Bindur itself.

The deathly howls of hunger and decay wrought fear to those who heard it. Adrian dreaded it, hated it, and feared it. It was the sound of an insatiable hunger, and unshackled power. Keyes had spent hundreds of years studying the Flood, he had summed them up into being the ultimate parasitic hive entity. It was capable of self-evolution on an unprecedented scale. But most of all, it possessed an innate intuition on the smallest level that was thought non-existent. One spore could well indeed bring down an entire planet by itself.

There was a misconception that the Flood assimilated the host mere seconds, though that was true, it had never really occurred to anyone that the Parasite was capable of passive assimilation. No one lived long enough to see it happen.

"Hit centre mass," Adrian said, "Headshots won't do much."

SOGs had been trained to always hit the head, but the combat forms' weakness was not the head, but the chest. It was where the infectious form resided. Kill that, and the body will become limp.

Arca felt the Harrier kick lightly against his shoulder as he rained

accurate fire down on the Flood struggling up the incline. The rifle hissed and beeped as its thermal clip was spent, forcing him to eject the superhot casing and slap in a fresh one.

Combat forms darted back and forth, firing with whatever weapons they had in their hands. The hellish volume of fire forced the two Operatives to retreat to the other end of the mesa. Dozens of parasites exploded or fell beneath the salvos of superb marksman ship, but there was plenty left still alive.

One form which used to be a female PMC leapt over a thicket and landed right in front of Adrian. He felt his gag reflexes kick in as the unfiltered stench coursed through his malfunctioning mask. The form's head was bent back awkwardly, her head was still agape and her hair flowed lazily down her back.

Arca quickly slammed the butt of the Harrier into the form's sagged and withered chest, and was rewarded with the sound of snapping ribs and crushed organs. The form dropped like a puppet, allowing the Operative to police the AD17 Assault Rifle.

The weapon was a particle accelerator weapon, constantly misidentified as plasma. Everyone in RnD knew how bad plasma was in atmospheric conditions.

Adrian shouldered the weapon, and returned to his gruesome work. The rounds from the rifle burned straight through unshielded flesh and armour, filling the air with a foul stench.

"We're losing a lot of ground!" Lotus griped.

He slapped in a fresh clip for his battle rifle and continued firing, trying his best to keep the horde at bay. The weapon thumped and roared as it hurled out rounds at high velocity. Bullets tore straight through flesh and bone, toppling over dozens at a time.

But the Flood was not defeated, even in their limp state, they continued to crawl, tentacles outstretched. Lotus curbed stomped an infectious form that got too close, while shooting another pure ranged form.

So far there was no sign of the carrier forms or the behemoth, which was good news so far. Adrian would have no idea how he and Bryce could deal with the heavier archetypes in their heavily wounded state.

As they retreated down the rocky slopes, a lot of the dead Flood forms began to roll down, adding more to the issue.

"Fuck this!" Bryce swore.

With his rifle empty, he twirled it, and handled it at the barrel, holding it like a bat. He swung it savagely at an assimilated krogan that had decided to go in for the charge. Lotus was rewarded with a resounding thwack, a broken carapace, a horribly bent rifle, and a shower of gore.

He discarded the useless weapon, and unsheathed Yamamoto, activating the plasma edge. The sword hissed a cracked, leaving trails of ionised air in its wake. Blue arcs leapt down as the

Operative scythed through a cluster of infectious forms and an assimilated turian.

Things were getting really messy now, it was hard to keep track of where they were headed. Adrian was sure that they had deviated off their original course. But they were still going downhill.

"Airspace is too hot, we need to land a few hundred metres north of your position," the Chief said over the COMs.

"Copy that," Arca growled. He switched off the link. "Fuck!"

The AD17 ran out of ammo, its cells depleted. With a pistol in the left and the sword in the other, Adrian continued on fighting. He couldn't count how many kills he had accumulated, it was too many. But he was thankful that his shield meter hadn't dipped below critical.

"We gotta move!" He said, seeing the nav marker on his static washed HUD.

"I see it," Lotus concurred.

The two Operatives made a mad dash down the hill, jumping over sharp rock edges and through bushes. The Flood were still close, in fact, they were everywhere. Adrian was sure that he and Bryce were the only people left that hadn't been assimilated.

Rounds of all kinds splashed and dug into the grass around their position, kicking up dirt and shattering rocks.

"Where the fuck are the sentinels!" Bryce roared.

"Got a visual!" Adrian panted, he highlighted the flying entities in the distance.

The two Operatives felt relief washed across them as they saw the containment unit roll across the infested grounds. But that relief and elation was short lived.

"_You just don't get it do you! I've seen them evolve! They can assimilate machines now!"_ Adrian remembered Keyes say.

Bindur's sentinels had been assimilated a long time ago. The once sleek and streamlined machines were now encased in a carapace of decay. They were coming in to find and kill any stragglers.

Adrian's heart dipped even further when he realised that there were at least half a dozen enforcer sentinels within his field of sight, all assimilated.

"There is no fucking way our luck can be that bad!" Lotus swore.

Enforcers broke formation and came down on them like hungry vultures, pummelling the ground around them with mortar fire.

"Run!" Adrian roared. The Operative flicked on his COM. "Chief, what do we have for air assets?"

"Just us, Keyes has ordered a full retreat."

"Shit."

Arca and Lotus ran for their very lives, throwing as much force into every push as superhumanly possible.

Adrian emptied the last of his pistol mag into a krogan combat form, before jumping onto the fallen body with a sickening thud. The two hacked their way through the horde, burning flesh and melting armour, their air filled with the horrible smell of cooked bodies.

"Almost there!" Bryce panted.

Since he was not as wounded as Adrian, the Operative had taken the lead in the run, but he wasn't willing to leave his friend behind. They scrambled onto another mesa, putting a few more precious metres between them and the enemy.

But still, there was a large volume of fire thrown their way.

"I got eyes on the drop!" Bryce never got to finish.

Like a bird of prey, a flying Flood form screeched in and grabbed the Operative with one of its biomechanical tentacles. It was like the cross between an infected squid and a Reaper. Squids and Octopi were something Adrian was innately fearful of. Seeing his friend just being plucked off the ground by his worst nightmare wasâ€| petrifying.

He could only stare numbly as Bryce was tossed around like a ragdoll before being dragged off.

"Bryce!" Adrian screamed. "Bryce!"

The COMs flickered to life. "Arca!" it was the Chief, "Haul ass out of there!"

Snapping out of his daze, the Operative realised that the Flood was upon him once more. He kicked a combat form squarely in the chest, watching it fly back reeling end over end. It left a trail of greenish blood across the rocks.

But the lapse in concentration had cost him dearly, one form managed to get close enough to lash out with its misshapen appendage. Adrian's shields drained by a quarter, it was enough incentive for him to run.

He pushed as hard as his legs would allow him to, and crashed into a combat form wielding an Ember rifle. He quickly hacked off the creature's arms, sheathed the blade, and took the weapon.

â€|

Sammi felt at ease with the two Spartans taking charge. As soon as the Osprey's doors had opened, the Chief and Commander Shepard had thundered down the ramp and taken up defensive positions. Salas quickly ordered her Helljumpers to form a defensive ring around the dropship, creating interlocking fields of fire.

The ODSST cradled her Sabre-L, it packed a strong punch, but its fire rate was significantly lower than the SCAR-L. She assumed that by the end of the month, the SCAR family would replace the MA9 as the standard issue.

"Stay frosty boys and girls," Huntress said.

He'll be here soon_.

"This is Arca!" his voice crackled over the COM, he sounded stressed, frustrated, and shocked. "Something has just grabbed Lotus! I repeat, something just fucking grabbed Lotus! He's gone."

It wasn't lost on Salas when she saw the Chief shifted and rolled his shoulders.

A few minutes later, the tempo of battle had increased significantly. The Flood was aware of an available transport for the taking. But the ODSSTs stood their ground, and aimed for centre mass. Hundreds of the fleshy bastards burst into mists of greenish plumes, causing a chain reaction amongst its own cluster.

"Combat form, left!"

"Shifting left!"

Sala pivoted and aimed down her sight. The form shuddered and came to a crashing halt, unable to get up until it was revived again. But Shepard made sure that the thing would never come back to live.

Sammi watched in fascination as the Commander was enveloped in an azure mist, and sent lances of it into the horde. Scores of infectious forms exploded, while combat forms were plucked off the ground and dangled helplessly.

The resulting biotic explosion tore the forms into smaller pieces that would pose a problem for the immediate future.

"Coming in from the south!" Arca gasped, "I need covering fire!"

The forsaken howls and horrific growls began to increase; it grated on the Captain's nerves and almost robbed her of her will to fight. But so long as the Chief was still standing, the Helljumpers would stand their ground.

Arca appeared over the ledge, scrambling up onto the mesa. His armour was battered, charred, and caked in a layer of his own blood. Every so often, he would turn around, and smite a form with his sword, cutting them neatly in half.

By the time he reached the dropship, it was clear to Sammi that he was running on stims. His breath was laboured, his blue eyes had a hint of yellow, and he was on the verge of collapse. The Chief broke from his position by the door and shouldered the wounded Operative, helping him onto the Osprey.

"Everybody, back in the bird!" Salas ordered.

Methodically, the ODSSTs broke off from their interlocking fields of

fire and boarded the dropship. The doors had barely closed when the pilot gunned the engines, roaring for Bindur's exit.

"We're clear!" the pilot said.

Sammi looked out the viewport and was greeted by the sight of the red-orange nebulas that surrounded the system. They were safeâ€| for now.

"Easy, easy," she heard the Chief say. Salas pivoted her head to see Arca sitting in the seat opposite to her. His helmet or hood lay in a crumpled heap by his feet, and his face was buried into his palms.

"He's gone," Arca whispered.

The Chief said nothing, but sat down next to the Operative, and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Shepard remained quiet, but she had removed her helmet and gave a sorrowful expression.

It was clear to Salas that Lotus was a friend to these people.

"Thanks for coming to get me," Arca said softly.

"You're welcome," the Chief and Shepard said in unison.

Slowly, Arca removed his hands and looked up. He turned his blue eyes and looked deeply into her brown ones. Sammi's heartbeat slowed to a crawl. The last time she had seen those eyes, they were deep brown, and filled with warmth and life. Now, they were blue and cold, and weeping with blood and tears.

"Adrian?" she barely whispered.

A sad smile formed across his lips. "Hey Sammi."

"Bryce is Lotus, isn't he?"

A nod, a very slow and agonising nod.

"And Etrius?"

"Dust on Earth," came the weak and saddened reply.

Salas leaned back into her chair, trying to process what she had learnt. Her eyes were wide, and filled with shock. No doubt her people would ask her about this, she had always been strong for them. But realising that her childhood friends were Spooks, either broken or dead, it shocked her. Drained her, leaving only a dark emptiness.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD A GREYHAWK, TERMINUS SYSTEMS, EN ROUTE TO **_**NIGHT HORSE**_**

Sandman was unconscious, but his condition was stable. And Arca was secured. That was one less thing for Palmer to worry about as eased off her helmet and turned to face the other ONISAD Operative. He sat

on the bench with his shoulders sagging, and head bent. It was something Sarah had come to know all too well, despair and defeat.

"How are you holding?" Palmer asked, trying to ease the pregnant silence.

The Operative eased off his helmet, and turned his broken face towards her. His blue eyes were bleeding; his beard clung to each other by blood. She didn't know his name, and felt prudent to ask.

"My name is Mitchell Ronald Coulson," he began, "they call me Oxide."

The callsign didn't click with her. It quickly dawned on her that he was Sixth Element. They weren't there for the introductions, and Ninth were in their Prowler. An eerie ghostly feeling spread through Sarah as a conflict of emotions swirled within. It was a cold anger, mixed with a calm acceptance and sympathy.

Oxide was one of the people that killed Crimson-Two. In the time that Palmer had been with ONISAD, she realised one thing—every single one of them was broken. Every single one had a shattered soul, a bane of themselves. Slowly, Sarah's hand hovered over her sidearm.

Mitchell bee-lined the movement, but he didn't react to it. Instead, he looked Palmer dead in the eye. His Adam's apple dipped down and he exhaled slowly.

"Look at what they make us give," he said softly, "look at how much we gladly give. Look at how much she made us give—and how much we gladly gave."

His voice was hoarse and on the verge of breaking. Palmer couldn't find it in herself to even point a gun at him.

"Everything you need, is on the Nightwalker, and this helmet," Mitchell said, tossing his helmet to Sarah's feet. "Forgive me."

With one swift motion, Oxide drew his pistol, pointed it at his temple and squeezed the trigger. Time seemed to slow down as blood and brain matter was sent flying within the hold. Palmer jumped in shock.

She had never seen anyone commit suicide right in front of her, never seen a man desperate enough to put a bullet through his brain.

Slowly Thorne moved towards Mitchell. Sarah had forgotten that the Spartan was standing right next to her. He didn't jump, he didn't shudder, but his shoulder sagged in sadness. It was then she realised that he had become one of them a long time ago. He was one helluva good actor, able to pass himself off as the quiet and unassuming Spartan, just like Keyes, until they received the transfer.

Gabriel knelt next to the body slumped in the chair, and closed Mitchell's eyes.

"Be at peace," he whispered, almost prayer like, "Kärie Eläison."

Religion wasn't as widespread as it used to be. Extremists had aligned themselves with Rebel groups, abhorrent of how augmented humanity had become. A large percentage of the Coalition still followed a faith of some kind, but there were also large portions who were atheists and agnostic.

It seemed logical that the people in ONI would practice a faith in order to seek a small measure of peace that became ever so fleeting as each day passes.

Sarah felt something inside her wither away, the fire, the flair in her personality forever extinguished, and replaced by something else. Something like a grim acceptance.

â€|

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE**_**

The Greyhawk touched down into the main hangar bay. Sarah and Gabriel stepped aside and let the medics do their work. Some of them had been long timers, unfazed by Spook that had committed suicide.

"I'll make sure Sandman's okay," Thorne said. "Are you going to be okay?"

Palmer nodded, not trusting her own voice to work. Seeing Mitchell's empty eyes, only filled with despair, before he pulled the trigger, it stirred something inside her. This was exactly what Adrian had warned her about.

"I'll see you in a few," Gabriel said, before trailing behind Riley's stretcher.

Hawker, the pilot, exited and gave Sarah a look of condolences before leaving. This wasn't the first time someone had blown the brains out in his bird.

Palmer paced back and forth on deck, until finally, the last Osprey arrived. It was what she cared about at the moment. She didn't give a damn about the salvos of nukes leaving the ships. All she wanted to know was if Adrian and Bryce made it out okay.

But when the doors parted open, Sarah felt her heart drop, and her chest ache. The ODS'Ts went their separate ways; their Captain gave a small word of reassurance before leaving. Adrian whispered something to Shepard and the Chief, allowing them to leave. They had pressing concerns with Keyes, but Sarah didn't care.

The moment she saw Adrian's blood caked face, cold eyes and slumped posture, she knew that a lot of him had curled up and died. Bryce was a symbol to all SOGs, a fleeting dream that only he had caught, while the rest, like Adrian had lost.

In one hand, he held his helmet by the strap, letting it batter against his legs uncaringly. In the other hand, he held the Ember rifle.

"Adrian," Sarah called.

He didn't answer; he was just focused solely on getting somewhere.

Unable to trust him in his current condition, she slowly brushed her fingers along his hand, forcing him to relinquish the rifle. His fingers slowly uncurled from the grip, allowing her to carry the weapon. Next, she removed the pistol from his holster, and blades from their scabbards. Sarah had already seen one man take his own life today, and she'd be damned if she was going to let Adrian take his.

The two never stopped walking, Sarah just followed Adrian, making sure that he wouldn't do something stupid. She was aware that he had been shot in the back with Catalyst rounds, but she wasn't going to push it. His body was stable anyway.

As they walked through the decontamination chambers, Palmer watched the murky water cascade off Adrian, slowly washing away the mud and blood. She wouldn't say he came out squeaky clean on the other end, but at least she could see the camo pattern now.

They continued on walking in silence, just walking, until they finally reached the park. He still looked like hell amongst the beautiful plant life. He led her through the mazes until finally they reached a quiet and secluded hilltop, overlooking the rest of the park.

Adrian fell to his knees, and leaned his head against a tree trunk. He drew his fist, and punched into the thick timber. Sarah quickly ambled over to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. She didn't know what to do, she felt helpless, constricted.

She watched as tears mixed with blood stream down his cheeks and drop onto the grass. A silent cry escaped his lips. He drew his fist again, and slammed into the trunk. He cried again, roaring in pain and grief. His chest heaved, his eyes flared and quickly turned into anger before disappearing again into coldness and despair.

"He's gone," Adrian whispered. "I did everything to keep him safe, but he's gone."

Sarah knew there was nothing she could say that could help. She hated that. Usually she could set a soldier straight by making them suck it up. But how could she tell Adrian to belt up? How could she tell Mitchell to belt up? The answer is no, she couldn't. Because they spent their entire careers repressing it, and when it could no longer be contained, it could not be containable. That was the reality of it.

"Why do I get to live?" he whispered.

Adrian pivoted and gazed straight into her eyes. "Tell me, why do I get to live? And they don't?"

Sarah turned her gaze away, she couldn't answer that. Slowly, they shifted their stance, and just sat at the tree.

"How am I going to tell my family about this?" he asked

softly.

"You're lucky to still have a family," Sarah blurted. She suddenly regretted saying it.

"I've read your file," he said. "I know. But how do I tell Julia about this? How do I tell Bryce's parents about this? How do I tell them?"

His head slowly dipped down again. The two remained there for some time, letting Adrian grieve silently.

****XXxxxXX****

"_Is it Three-Echo or Echo-Three?"
>_**-Garad**_

"_Echo-Three indicates ONISAD, Three-Echo indicates a SpecWar Team."
>_**-Sandman**_

"_That's confusingâ€¦ we're called Third Element, so logically it should be Three-Echo"
>_**-Garad**_

"_It's Echo-Three __**[shrugs]**__, you get used to it."
>_**-Sandman**_

****XXxxxXX****

****A/N:** I think I've turned Palmer's character around a lot. Does anyone still see her as Major Annoying Pain Gung-ho Marine in this story anymore?******

****I also consider this to be my master piece at targeting the feels.****

â€¦

****On another noteâ€¦ I seriously regret having Shepard's name as Jane because it sounds so generic. Shoulda made it "Emma" or "Abigail" (no wait, that's taken), or "Alicia" or something along those lines. The Chief's name, John, it may seem generic, but there is a biblical meaning behind it.****

â€¦

****Please leave a review and let me know.****

49. New Aliances

****A/N:** Everything will tie inâ€¦******

****This chapter has been Co-written between me and Aznboi52****

****XXxxxXX****

"_I'm not saying that she's calm, but she's thankful for Lasky's intervention. You gentlemen have done a lot to bring her back. Thanks."

>_**-(Formerly) LTCOL Essingdon Dominic Keyes, thanking Second Element (I) and Eighth Element for gathering intel which led to Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey's rescue**_

XXxxXX

SERPENT NEBULA, CITADEL II, PRESIDIUM, COUNCIL COMMITTEE CHAMBERS (COUNCIL TOWER)

Lasky gazed back and forth over the green pulsating committee. There were groups of diplomats representing ever faction recognised by the Council sitting at the first level, and reporters from hundreds of networks sitting at the second level.

This was a moment in history that many did not want to happen, but it had to be done. Reports from political and intelligence analysts strongly indicated that if this event was to go through, then ONI would have a hard time keeping the Insurrectionism under control.

Tom was worried, but calm at the same time. He was concerned about the future. And for the first time in a long time, he felt like things were about to turn for the worst.

"The Coalition does not have a seat on the Council, let alone the UNSC," Irissa said. She was the new Asari Councillor, and from what the reports have told, Lasky knew her to be colder than her predecessor, striking whenever the opportunity presented itself. It was evident that she wanted humanity off the galactic stage and out of Council affairs. "If the Alliance is to merge with the UNSC, humanity's seat on the Council will be forfeit; however you will still be able to have an embassy."

Ruthless bitch, Lasky pondered. He could feel Hood tensing in his seat, clearly sick of what was transpiring. Tom couldn't blame him, hell, if the Fleet Admiral decided to pull out his sidearm and shoot the asari, he'd probably join in.

Trying to pass time, Lasky shifted his gaze to the assortment of plants and water features around the room. _Relaxing, my assâ€¦_ he said inwardly. The ornaments were supposed to ease nerves that probably worked when people weren't _discussing politics_.

"What of current human Spectre, Commander Jane Shepard?" Ambassador Richard Enderfield asked. It was clear his patience was near its end. Such a "simple" matter should not involve the bloody Council.

"She will still have her Spectre status," Quentius said.

Lasky had taken a liking towards the new Turian Councillor. He was reasonable, and an open supporter of Shepard. He was a visionary much like Enderfield. Thanks to him, relations between the Coalition and the Council will not deteriorate.

"Pardon me," Tom interrupted, leaning forward in his chair, "but with all due respect, why does the merger require Council supervision?"

The Councillors were stunned by the question. It had merit in it considering the context of the situation. Did they have a right in meddling with internal human affairs? On some grounds yes, but given what had transpired over the past few weeks, no. The Alliance Parliament and Defence Committee had been annihilated in their entirety. Only a few high ranking senior officers and administrative officials were running things.

A merger between the UNSC and Alliance would be beneficial for the foreseeable future, but it could give the Insurrectionists more ground to "continue" their campaign. They could twist so much towards their favour. And from what Lasky had been told about the conference, some people were unhappy to have learned that the UNSC abandoned people back on Earth many centuries ago.

I hope to god this all goes well, he said inwardly.

"This merger," Irissa began, turning her gaze towards the Admiral, "is important to the interest of the wider galactic community. The path humanity travels down plays an great role in our future."

Lasky felt his stomach turn. Oh the filth the asari councillor was spilling was borderline unbearable.

Admiral Hackett stood up from his chair and walked to the central table with the declaration printed out on paper. "The Alliance was once the UNSC," he said, "it's time for humanity to reform once more."

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE**_**, TERMINUS SYSTEM****

Keyes stared out of the view port, looking at the heavily battered Forerunner shield world. Seconds before the detonation of nuclear warheads, spikes of Chekhov radiation was detected, indicating a large slipspace jump.

Analysts believed that a large number of Flood units may have "escaped" the planet, bound for unknown locations. Was he scared? Of course he was. Recent events that had led up to this moment were more than mere coincidence.

He turned back to the panel of observers and intelligence analysts, scanning through documents and reports from the archives.

"Any leads?" he asked.

"Nothing yet, Keyes," Anna Greenfield said.

Donnie pivoted to face the central table, displaying information about all of Parangosky's known activities.

_Operation Surge; observe Flood behaviourâ€¦ ship of recommended;
Mona Lisa.._

Data handed over to ONI by Sixth Element revealed an eerie picture of the former Head wishing to gain control over the Reapers.

Force estimates had put the Reapers somewhere in the millions. A force like that would be devastating if used properly. But why would Parangosky want to control the Reapers and not tell High Command about it? Why would she create Cerberus and not tell anyone about it?

Good people had gotten killed over such petty things, it was depressing and frustrating. The former Admiral's move did not make any sense, she may be a heartless cow, but not _evil_.

Keyes flicked his eyes over to the screen displaying all of the findings on the Flood.

Contrary to popular belief, the Flood can control the rate of assimilation. Tests have shown that Flood infection can remain undetected for a few generations until abnormalities are noticeable.

Then it hit him—the revelation made his back prickle his heat, and the room uncomfortably hot.

"Oh my god," Keyes uttered. He recalled Margaret's "fascination" with the Flood. She had orchestrated the events surrounding the _Mona Lisa_. She wanted a way to stop the Parasite conventionally should the need ever arise.

Cerberus was a means to that. It was her way of monitoring the galaxy, because with everyone worrying about the Insurrectionists and pirates, who was going to bother about Earth? Answer, no one of importance.

Now thinking about it, Essingdon guessed why Parangosky kept Cerberus quiet. High Command would probably get a bit too nosey and get in the way, or reduce funding, which would hamper the Human Supremacists capabilities severely.

"What's wrong?" Greenfield asked.

She beelined Keyes's line of sight and soon reached the same page. Quickly, the entire room caught up, and what was once a place of discussion, had rapidly shifted into a deafening silence. This was the most plausible lead they had.

"You mean to say, that Parangosky at some point in time, went under the Flood's influence?" Fhajad asked.

Keyes nodded slowly. Everything was laid out in front of him. Research trends in assimilated life forms, parasitic behaviours, Flood tendencies, Cerberus research patterns and operations. All of it, pointed to that one notion.

This was a game changer. Essingdon could feel his chest constrict as his wide eyes darted back and forth between screens. His brilliant mind possessed higher cognitive abilities than the average human; conclusions like these were difficult, but undeniably accurate.

Parangosky's contingency plans for Omega caused it to crash inside of Bindur, and she knew that. She would've, she made it to Director after all. But why would she want to destroy the station? Strategic

value maybe, or something even more sinister. The Adjutants found there could be the tip of the ice berg, simply removing the station would cover her tracksâ€¦ and take out a large number of experience Arcani Operatives along the way.

The picture was become increasingly clearer now. If Parangosky was under the influence of the Flood, it would be like someone being under the influence of the Reapers. They would believe that what they were doing was beneficial to all life as a whole. The same could be said for Margaret, in her hubris or miscalculation at some point in history, she came into contact with Flood spores.

This would've set her onto a declining path. It was more than likely that she was past the point of delusional. Cerberus was a means for her to monitor the galaxy and investigate the Reaper Myth. If the Reapers were true, then they would be an excellent source of firepower. Thus Cerberus's research into Reaper technology.

"Fhajad, get everyone on alert, mobilise what you can," Keyes ordered in a calm fashion. "Initiate reinforcement protocols, I want all our people operating at full capacity."

The Spartan-II gave a nod before heading out of the Faraday Caged room to relay the orders. He soon returned back to get his coat and straighten his tie. "Orders been relayed, we got to go to the funeral now."

â€¦

There was a silence in the memorial hall, an eerie silence that hung like a deafening sound. Jane gazed across the faces of all who were present. It was time for commemoration, the first of many. In the short time the Commander had been around the UNSC, she knew that they had an entire myriad of dress codes unlike the Alliance.

The remaining few ONISAD were clad in all blacks, suit and tie, with gloves, ceremonial cap, ultra-light armoured vest and shoulder pads, all devoid of rank and insignia save for the white trim. On their heads they wore hoods that covered their entire face, leaving only the blue eyes to be concealed by the slim angular sunglasses. They stood out in such a contrast to the rest, for they instilled fear and awe.

Shepard found it odd that ONISAD would have such things in their wardrobe considering their field of expertise, but she had to admit, they looked certainly fearsome and spectacular in their immaculate and streamlined clothing.

UNSC Officers, including Miranda Keyes, stood beside ONISAD in the ceremonial dress respective to their affiliations. Palmer, Rook, and Wizard wore the Spartan-IV dress blacks, adorned with their medals and original service branch.

John's dress blacks however, were different, as it had a tie. Jane wasn't sure if it was purely aesthetic or symbolic, probably both. The tie seemed to represent something in the UNSC. But he wasn't the only one in the Spartan-II dress blacks, an old friend was with him as well, Fhajad. Even Cortana was here, dressed in a formal black outfit. The AI's face and mannerisms were filled with sadness.

Shepard gazed back and forth the polished black coffins draped in the Flags of the UNSC and ONI. Some of them were empty; others were barely filled with remains. The wreaths that lay upon them were white, and surrounded by blood red roses, they stood out in dark contrast against the onyx timber. At the front of the stage, on the white marble floor was a glazed glass panel, which read; Innominatam, et Inferus mox poni ad requiem. Roughly translated into The nameless and the faceless will soon be put to rest.

The culture within ONISAD was an unspoken taboo, people did not join up for the glory, they never did. Most of them joined because it was either a job promotion, better pay, or suited to their skill set. Many attempted to know what they were getting into. But by the time they realised the cost, it was too late, they couldn't go anywhere else, not with the dark secrets and horrors held deep within their minds. That was what the plaque represented. A price paid beyond what could be given.

Shepard knew that John understood this world. He was originally created for this world. She could see him tense up as his soft eyes washed across the glass pane and the coffin. It was like a painful reminder to him.

Keyes stood at the podium, dressed in a blackish grey uniform, with a tie as well. His eyes glinted in the soft light as he began to address those who had come to pay their respects. A few hundred or so people, most of them work colleagues.

"The men who lie here, are the nameless and the faceless," the Director said solemnly, "they do what they do out of a sense of purpose and an inkling of patriotism. These men walk the fine line of light and darkness, devoting their lives to keep families safe at night."

Essingdon breathed before gazing back down to his script.

"I will not lie, when these men first joined, they could barely grasp what kind of world they were entering. But regardless of what caused them to become one of us, they stayed for the very same reason as the people beside did. They give than more that can ever be given, and we will remember the sacrifices they have made. We will honour them, and let them rest, for they have deserved it."

Shepard noticed Keyes making eye contact with Arca. In the ranks of uniformed ONISAD Operatives, Jane could tell which one was Adrian; his stance was slightly slouched and depressed than the rest. It was barely noticeable to the unknowing eye, but she knew, they all knew.

"As for us who are still here, the hunt is not over, it's far from over. A storm awaits us, and we're going to do everything we can to pull through."

The procession slowly left the stage as the ceremony came to a close. An orchestra filled with classical instruments began to play an age old hymn. The Paramilitary Officers who were familiar with the tune began to sing along in Latin. Slowly, the hall began to sound like a Cathedral during mass; Jane found it comforting but slightly eerie. It was a reminder of the pain humanity had to endure.

People who had come to honour the fallen broke into smaller groups, as Shepard followed the Chief towards the coffins. Adrian, Sarah, Riley and Gabriel stood in front of Etrius and Bryce's coffins which had been laid side by side.

Greystone's body hadn't been shipped back to the Ark for confidentiality reasons, and neither had Bryce's. Shepard could only imagine the pain Adrian was going through.

Soon, Miranda and Essingdon arrived with sorrowful expressions on their faces. The Head of ONI beckoned the masked Arca to have a private word with him.

"Yeah?" Adrian sighed.

"We've never been hit this hard before," Keyes said. "I'm reforming teams, and at the same time, I'm giving you, Chief, Palmer, Thorne and Sanderson some shore leave. Shepard can come along if she wishes."

"Get to the point," Arca said sharply. Bitter knowledge of the deaths of his childhood friends burned deep inside him. First his original team, then Edmund, followed by Etrius and Bryce. Shepard knew that it wasn't something that could be easily coped with. Hell, she was still having a hard time getting over Ashley, Chambers and Chakwas's death.

These losses happened only a few weeks ago, but it felt like lifetimes away. That was what fighting does to a person.

"On Deck-Five-Charlie, there is a new batch of Arcani waiting to be sorted. Grab how many you want, then take a day or two off at the Citadel."

Adrian turned and gestured towards the coffins. "What about them?"

"I'll give you three days then," Keyes said.

"And the Chief?"

"I'll give him some R'n'R." There was a long pause, "Remember to tell Julia."

"I will," Adrian said.

"And talk to your family."

Although his face was covered, it was obvious that the Officer was glaring at his friend.

"It's for the best, Adrian."

"Fine."

Arca promptly left the hall, walking down the walkway with Sandman in tow. Ever since Riley had been discharged from hospital, he always remained in close proximity to Adrian, just as a safety precaution.

Shepard had to admire that characteristic. The care and bond that the men shared, it was a strong brotherhood, forged in more than just fire. But she noticed that Adrian did not stop by the coffins for too long, maybe it was too painful for him. It was hard to tell with his face covered, he had forced his body language back to neutral, unreadable.

Keyes walked over to Jane, and spoke in a low voice. John had moved up to Bryce's empty coffin to pay final words.

"His armour has been showing signs of increased stress," the Director said.

"I can tell," Jane said. "It's not that hard."

Keyes raised an eyebrow.

"I want to thank you for keep an eye out for him, if it wasn't for youâ€|" there was a long sigh, "I don't know what would've happened. Probably don't want to."

"Glad I could help," Shepard said nonchalantly.

"I'm serious," Keyes emphasised. "Just keep an eye on him, he takes these deaths just as hard as the next person."

But doesn't show it.

"I'm aware of that," Jane said, "he's been thinking about Blue a lot recently."

"I don't blame him," Keyes said, tugging his sleeves. "Down time is a bitch to all of us."

"Don't worry," Shepard reassured, "I'll look out for him."

"Thanks."

Jane breathed a sigh of contentment. This was really the first time anyone had said thanks to her. A fully sincere thank you, it was a small gesture, but the fact that someone had taken the time to say that, well it meant a lot. She knew that John was grateful for her when she came a long, but the nature in which he grew up in, made it difficult for him to display any small measure of sentiment.

Keyes was a good person, and ONI's future looked bright with him at the helm. She just hoped he knew how to steer through the storm.

****XXxxXX****

"_Let me put into perspective of how powerful Spartans are. They twenty-fourth century allows the common citizen to be superhuman, by twenty-first century standards. Superhuman or transhuman is now human by the twenty-sixth century. So what is actually superhuman in the twenty-sixth century? My Spartans of course."_

-Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey**-**

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: This chapter serves to answer any questions with what's happening.****

****Anyway, please review and let me know what you think.****

50. FNG and Shore Leave

****A/N: And we're back****

****XXxxXX****

"You're kidding me right?" Adrian said incredulously. His voice was low, borderline growling.

All eyes in the transport tube turned to him.

"It's plausible that she might be under the Flood's influence, we've seen the test with delayed assimilation."

"Parangoskyâ€| controlled by the Flood?" Adrian sighed, shaking his head. "Are you listening to yourself Donnie?"

"Look, the analysts and Iâ€|"

"You, me, and you're panel of analysts all have lost someone at Northfold. We all hate her, but listen to yourself!" Arca interrupted.

Keyes remained silent, averting his gaze to the floor. He leaned back against the white hull and crossed his arms. "It doesn't make sense, why would she?"

"She's a war criminal," Adrian said bluntly, boring his blue eyes at the Director. "She doesn't want to be caged up like your motherâ€| or worse."

"Do you really think it's that simple?" Essingdon asked. He had never been one for blatantly simple ideas; he always held a belief that there was always something more elaborate lying underneath.

"Sometimes it is."

And just like, the theory had disappeared into nothingness. What Adrian said was true; ONI was blinded by their hatred towards Parangosky. He was wary enough to stay clear of that trap, regardless of how much the bitch had taken from him.

"She is still dangerous," the Operative added, "she's got a large portion of Aegis in her hands, and who knows how many terror cells."

"You think she'll make another Northfold?"

Adrian nodded.

"Okay, I'll mobilise everyone."

Mobilising in this context meant that all of ONI's critical operations would be going mobile. Operational Command, Administration Management and whatever R'n'D projects would be moved onto the Organisation's stealth fleets.

Training facilities would have an increase in security, and sites will still be manned, but all pinnacle staff would be stationed on ships. Something like that would be expensive, but no chances could be taken. Not with Parangosky running rampant. If she could attack Northfold successfully, she could do it to other facilities, such as Forbidden City.

"What's the situation outside?" the Paramilitary Officer asked.

Keyes rubbed the back of his neck. "There's been talk of a merger between the Alliance and the UNSC. Containment Teams haven't come into with any Flood, and I'm ordering more SOGs classes."

ONISAD had been hit hard lately, the SOGs in particular.

Adrian turned his eyes down to his shoes, giving a small nod. Donnie knew that it was the look of a present pain that had not left.

"Hey, when you take time off, relax a little, and try not to worry about what's going on here okay? I've got things under control."

Arca gave a more pronounced nod.

"When you get the fresh batch, take them out; help them acclimatise on the Citadel."

"Okay."

Keyes turned to face John, who was sitting next to Shepard.

"R'n'R, get some now, because well, you know what's waiting for us."

John gave a gesture of understanding. He could do with a bit of shore leave before jumping back into the fray. Right now, while things were "quiet", he couldn't really do much. And it looked like Shepard agreed.

"I'm pulling back Gray and Red to cover for you, so don't worry."

The Chief's expression softened even further, he could always rely on his Spartan brothers and sisters. Shore leave sounded quite appealing right now. It was one of those take-it-or-leave-it moments that rarely John came across.

Coming to a stop, the tube's doors parted open with a whisper, allowing the occupants to disembark.

"Donnie, just remember, I think you're overreacting," Adrian said quietly.

Keyes cleared his throat.

"I know we want to try and justify what that bitch did, but sometimes, the reasons are anti-climatic."

"Yeah," Donnie sighed with a nod, "I know."

The group walked down the hallway a bit further until they parted for their separate ways. Essingdon and Liara were off to consolidate assets in order to combat future Flood and Fifth Column threats. Arca and Sandman walked towards the training room that held the next batch of Arcani, with Palmer and Thorne in tow.

"We'll meet you in a few," John said to the team when he noticed Jane starting to lag behind.

â€|

Gazing out of the viewport, Shepard felt a sense of nostalgia wash over her. It felt like a lifetime since she became a Spectre, but at the same time it felt like it was only yesterday. Gazing at where Omega once stood, it served as a reminder of how far Jane had come.

A slow soothing feeling spread across her chest as she inhaled, and remembered when the galaxy had its back turned on her. When it was really just her and a band of unique people just slugging it out. Now, she had the backing of the most powerful organisation known to the galactic stage. But at the same time, she was caught in a sinister conspiracy.

Shepard could always ask for _out_, but that just wasn't her way. Dealing with politics and a gun was her specialty that was why she was a Spectre after all.

"It's been a while, hasn't it."

John knew exactly what she was talking about. He knew about how she had to deal with the galaxy's scum to make sure innocent people slept easily in their beds. It was one hell of a ride that Shepard had been on, a truly unique experience. He had to admit that it was far more _colourful_ than his journey.

Jane got to experience eons of culture and human expansion into a wider community, before meeting him and seeing an even greater past. Yes, she had lived a thousand lifetimes with her journey. A good ride, one of the best of rides, but a damn tiring one.

The wears and tears of the journey were showing on her. Being involved in a sinister conspiracy did that to people, turned them all into the same mental age.

"Yes it has," John said, his deep voice held warmth in them. Something that had always been exceedingly rare

"When all of this is overâ€|" Jane trailed off, "hmm, we'll get there when we get there.

â€|

****DECK 5C****

Though not necessarily the ONISAD-SOG's training ground, the expansive chamber was nonetheless impressive. It currently simulated a night time, torrential rain environment for the candidates, or in this case, the graduates, to train in. Sarah's eyes trailed along the brutal course which was designed to push Spartans to their limits. She could see the next batch of Arcani Operatives climbing up the obstacles in the most unconventional way, straining their already fatigued body.

She moved to the observation deck, which overlooked the entire area, and gazing down, Sarah knew that the graduates were going through a marathon. No other military school or program in the UNSC demanded training marathons after graduation, especially this calibre. Airborne assessment phase was considered to be the most brutal, closely followed by the ODSs. Special Missions Unit training and selection are equally the same.

Curiously enough, selection for the Spartan-IV Program was not that intensive. Maybe it was because that the candidates had already proven themselves on the field of battle. Palmer did know that ONI did spend copious amount of time to finding the right recruit, so that also might have something to do with it.

SOG training looked brutal, the Arcani Program was implemented to train ONISAD-SOG Operatives, and mould them into becoming the perfect assassins. Below in the pit, men were crawling, no, swimming through the mud, before moving through a parkour section under heavy fire. Their movements were sloppy and lacked the precision that Sarah was used to seeing.

"Anyone ever drop out?" Palmer asked.

"I've never heard of anyone dropping out," Adrian said.

"Me neither," Riley shrugged.

"Let's go down and meet them."

Sarah was thankful that they took the time to stop by the lockers to get changed. She wore the standard bodysuit that Spartan-IVs wore when off duty, making her stand out against the Operatives whom wore grey-digital camo combat uniform, complete with matching armoured vest, shoulder, elbow, shin pads and gloves. It was designed to be worn during urban incursions where moving lightly through tight spaces was key. The gear they wore was absolute minimum allowed for combat.

Palmer was slightly thankful that they had their sleeves rolled up and left their helmets and other headgear back in the lockers. It made them look more human and less scary. She also noted that they always travelled armed, even when off-duty and inside the safety of a ship. Their black customised sidearms hung in their thigh holsters, ready to be drawn in a split second. The whole message of "don't fuck with us" was written all over them. However Riley decided to go a step further, and have his bow slung on his back.

Overkill much? Palmer pondered.

Upon reaching ground level, Sarah heard mud squelched under her boots and felt the rain soak through her hair and cargo pants. She was grateful that the bodysuit shed off any liquids. Watching Adrian walk to the Instructor, she could see the Operative's expression soften. Immediately, she knew that the Instructor was an old friend.

"Saps," Adrian greeted.

"Arca," Alec replied. He had curly, but neatly cut, short dirty blonde hair. His eyes were blue, and his features were slim. Sarah could tell that most of his limbs were prosthetic, mainly from the way he moved, and that his rolled up sleeves revealed onyx black arm. Unlike Adrian, he didn't try to hide his robotic limbs, but displayed them proudly.

"New batch? How old?"

Alec pursed his lips. "Fresh out of graduation, age varies between twenty-three and twenty-five."

Sarah watched a number of Operatives finish the parkour segment, and moved onto rope climb and rope swing. After that, they dove into a wave pool, swimming against the current to get to the other side. From there, they proceeded to the combat section. Each graduate had a rifle, a sidearm and a knife. Instructors were pushing them on through the course, increasing their stress levels significantly.

Eventually, the twenty-three graduates formed up in front of Alec. They were tired well beyond exhaustion, half of them were droning already. They wore the exact gear as Adrian and Gabriel was, but instead of being fresh and clean, they were caked in mud, and gore from the gut trench.

"I think this takes the cake for the hardest training course I've seen," Sarah commented.

Riley turned to face. She could see that his piercing blue eyes were just as weary as Adrian's, and there was a very thin, barely noticeable scar running vertically down over his left eye. The rain poured through his closely cropped brown hair, somehow enhancing his general tiredness. But at least his nature was more relaxed than Arca.

"This isn't training," Sandman said, "it's secondary breakdown."

Adrian walked amongst the ranks and inspected each Operative. Each one sported a different style of buzz cut hair, giving them a sense of uniformity and individuality simultaneously. Sarah swept her eyes across their tired faces. Despite their exhaustion, she could still see the cold, calculative, impersonal nature drilled into them.

"Gents," Alec said, addressing the class. "I'd like you to meet Arca."

All eyes turned to Adrian. They've all just completed the program, and in just a few days, they'll be shipped off for deployment.

"I'm here to grab replacements," he said bluntly.

None of the graduates moved, except to blink.

"Any suggestions?" Adrian asked Alec.

"Twins!" Saps called out.

Two men of Anglo Saxon descent with black hair and brown eyes quickly jogged to the front of formation. They gave a curt nod to Arca, ONISAD never saluted.

"Names?"

"Blazeâ€| "

"â€| and Viper."

Sarah arched an eyebrow. _Twins finishing each other's sentences, this'll be fun._ There was absolutely no way to tell each other apart. They looked exactly the same, same haircut, same mannerisms.

"And why do they call you that?" Sandman asked.

"Knack for clearing out positions with fire," Blaze answered.

"Precision and speed," Viper replied.

Adrian faced Alec. "What's the real story?"

Nicknames and call signs generally have a deprecating story behind them.

"Blaze ate a lot of chilli during our multi-cultural lessons, couldn't sit for a week, and Viper was bitten by a snake when he was a kidâ€| cried like a bitch," he turned to Palmer and raised his hands, "no offense."

"None taken," Sarah said. "Can we get out of the rain now?"

Alec gave a nod, and then addressed the class. "Follow me to the armoury."

Upon arriving into the weapons bay, Sarah quickly noted how _artistic_ the room looked. It was lacked the ever present utilitarian feel in the UNSC. Instead of angular tables, there were curved counters illuminated by lights.

"Alec loves to tinker. He holds master degrees in engineering, computer science and physics," Adrian supplied to Sarah. "He loves to take care of his weapons."

"No kidding," Palmer whispered, "this place feels like a jewellery store for millionaires."

"But, we are, millionaires," Adrian drawled.

"You know what I mean," Sarah sighed.

The group gathered around the central bench which was set up in a semi-amphitheatre area. Alec stood behind the counter, showcasing a weapon.

"Gather round kids."

Palmer saw a small smile on Adrian's face when Alec said 'kids'. There was a certain irony to it.

"We're not that young," Blaze said in a slight joking manner.

The class was recovering from the brutal marathon, but they would still be tired until they got food and enough bed rest. Blaze's little comment helped brighten up the spirits of his tired classmates.

"Yeah, and I'm not that senile," Alec replied. A few more instructors filed into the room. He then gestured to the onyx black streamlined weapon in front of him. "Kids, this is the Gauss Battle Rifle Model Two. We call it 'Grim the Second', or 'G2', or just 'Grim'."

The Senior Operatives folded their arms and gave a soft smile. Even Thorne appeared to be happy. Sarah had rarely seen him smile. It seemed genuine and it was probably about the gun, which seemed sad and tragic at the same time.

"Our older members will remember the first Grim."

"A damn good rifle," Sandman said. Thorne nodded in agreement.

"Well, the G2 just came fresh from the devs," Alec continued, he picked up the rifle for the demonstration. "Rounds have been optimised for maximum range, stopping power and capacity. Multiple magnetic coils along the barrel are powered by hydrogen fuel cells that you insert into the stock, just above the magazine. On maximum settings you can turn Innies into chum but be careful though, nearly burst my eardrums and almost burned the house down. On stealth settings, its whisper quiet and still packs enough punch to bring down shields quickly. Normal settings give Grim one hell of a bite. Finally my most favourite feature is the firing mechanism."

Alec's hand brushed over a compartment above the trigger, and replaced the box with a blue pulsating cylinder.

"Now, it's a DEW. Excellent for fighting the Flood, Innies and the Reapers."

"Must be a Grim"

"Reaper then!" Viper finished, "Zing!"

A few groans were made as everyone heard the terrible pun. Alec continued on his lecture about Grim, giving Sarah the inkling that he may have an obsession for destruction. He consistently focused on the damage output of the weapon. When he was done, he displayed other rifles, and as Palmer expected, he talked about how to take care of it with utmost prudence, and stopping power. Finally the talk was

over, and the class of Arcani Operatives dispersed to browse through the weapon racks, before leaving for the billets, leaving Viper and Blaze behind.

Sarah was somewhat annoyed at the graduates' comical behaviour. She found the jokes endearing, but the fact that they joked, disturbed her. Maybe it was because of that detached, impersonal look they had in their eyes.

Fresh out of training, and they know what they're getting into.

â€|

****CONTROL ROOM-01****

Liara had left to spend time with Shepard, leaving Keyes alone to ponder the conversation he had with Adrian. He had to admit that Chen was right. ONI's judgement had been clouded and hasty due to Parangosky crippling Northfold and beating hell out of ONISAD.

PAG were working overtime to try and tack her movements and freeze all of her assets. But Aegis's had assets that weren't part of the Coalition's economy. Hence they would be relatively immune from the PAG's incursions.

Section II was still busy cleaning up after the incident surrounding Omega. He really did not want people panicking about the Flood right now. Section I was still monitoring the suspiciously quiet Reapers. And well, Section III continued with their Black Ops Programs. The Arcani Program had been developed by them to be implemented into ONISAD.

It had been based open the culmination of covert and clandestine assassination programs. They made sure that the Operatives could carry out their order without question, but being human enough to trust, blend and work as an effective team. They weren't as heartless as their predecessors, but they could _work_ longer without requiring heavy drugs or breaking down. That time of training was hard to exploit. But Parangosky had exploited it. She was now a woman on the run, with an ace in the hole against ONI. That was what Keyes feared, it didn't help that a head count revealed that ONISAD was missing 13th Element.

"Fuck," he swore, slamming his pen down on the table. But he quickly regretted it, he had lost self-control, and his hands were now covered in ink.

Regardless of how much training a person had received, stress of having to deal with an unknown factor will always have the same effect. The unknown factor for Donnie's case was the Flood and Parangosky. Having a Fifth Column and a parasitic race running wild was never a good thing.

But this was ONI, so logically; they'd concentrate on the Fifth Column and let the rest of the UNSC handle the Flood, right? Wrong! They were ONI, they're entire existence revolved around having a hand or an eye on everything. Of course that was not logistically possible, but that was the gist of how the Organisation operated.

Really could use some shore leave right about nowâ€¦| should've taken it last year._

****XXxxXX****

****SERPENT NEBULA, CITADEL II, PRESIDIUM COMMONS, LI'SHIER HALL****

The calm before the storm was always stressful. Keyes had made that clear to John. He had never been much for shore leave, but according to the reports, it said that he needed one. The Spartan wasn't one to complain, he'll let the professionals do their job so that he could do his.

The station was currently going through its night cycle, there was a function happening. And John knew exactly what it was about. That was why he was in his dress blacks, and Shepard was wearing the dress blues with an eagle perched atop the Alliance Symbol.

He felt the need to smile at Ambassador Richard Enderfield's sheer brilliance. The Alliance had become a vassal of the UNSC, which meant that humanity got to retain its seat on the counsel, and the Alliance gets to have access to Tier-1 technology.

"History in the making," Jane commented.

The two of them stepped out of the formal skycar and onto the red carpet, manned by ODSTs in the ceremonial dress on the left, and N7s in their dress blues on the right.

Calmly, with such grace and precision, the two walked down through the throngs of reporters bombarding them with questions that Jane wasn't comfortable answering. Upon reaching the stairs, Shepard turned around and gave a polite wave, before disappearing behind the glass doors with John.

"So when do the others get here?" she asked, gazing around the immaculately decorated hall.

"Rook and Wizard have been reassigned," John answered, "Palme and her people are already here. Essingdon and Liara will be coming later. I'm not too sure about Vega, Cortez, and Joker though."

"I heard those guys wanted to go out for a movie."

"What movie?"

"Something Goblet, I dunno, I wasn't paying attention," Shepard shrugged.

John was a bit more of a talker these days, despite his register being quick and direct. It was still a sign of trust though, one that Shepard appreciated.

"There's Palmer and Cortanaâ€¦| and Anthony," Jane gestured. She was careful to use their cover names. Being able to read people had allowed her to gather that Adrian was one very paranoid person. She assumed that Gabriel and Riley would be the same.

"Gentlemen," John greeted politely. He made sure that he followed

conventions of a social event like this. For some reason though, he remembered how Johnson made fun of him wearing the MJOLNIR while everyone else was in ceremonial dress.

"Chief," Cortana beamed. She had changed her avatar form to wear a flowing navy halter neck top dress. "You look nice."

"Richards," Adrian said. Either the man had been paying attention to what the Chief wore, or his investigations to protect Halsey had allowed him to have glimpses of extremely sensitive files. Probably the later.

The group milled over by the bar which commanded an excellent vantage point over the hall. It was also next to the windows, providing an expansive view over the Citadel Wards, and the orbital habitats.

But despite the heavy Coalition presence in the system, John didn't feel safe. He could tell that Adrian and Riley were feeling the same too. Thorne however was a bit more difficult to read. Probably what made him an excellent asset to monitor others.

"You know you're paranoid, right?" Shepard said quietly to John.

He arched an eyebrow and tilted his head.

"Act less paranoid, just in case."

Shepard was just as paranoid too. Attending the ceremony was purely for PR. People at home loved to see their heroes fighting on the frontlines and making a difference, but they loved it even more when their heroes were out being normal people and relaxing.

From a morale standpoint, this was crucial. Recent events had damaged a fleeting morale in the galaxy. The ceasefire from the Reapers had not been that helpful as many believed the race of sentient starships were gearing up for a major offensive.

Gradually as time passed, more UNSC and Alliance officers arrived. John spotted a few delegates from the Coalition, such as Thel Vadam and his entourage of ambassadors and scholars. The Elites had become a truly remarkable race when their interests began to shift towards science. Their discipline allowed them to make such leaps and bounds that was thought not possible.

"Spartan," the Arbiter said with a respectful bow.

"Arbiter," John said with equal respect.

Shepard brought over a tray of drinks, she wasn't too sure if they were alcoholic or not, but it didn't really matter. The beverages wouldn't inebriate them in the slightest.

"My thanks, Shepard," the Elite said. "I have heard great things about you."

"As have I about you," Jane said. She made sure that she spoke with a polite and poetic register, in order to be respectful of Sangheili customs.

"What are your thoughts on recent events?" Thel asked.

"It's been difficult to say the least," Shepard said. "I've lost many friends on the way, and seen things that I never wish to see again."

"Trying times are ahead of us. With the parasite here, we can only hope to prevail before they do."

It was clear to John that the Elites were also concerned about recent events, particularly the Flood. But it was also clear that they were annoyed at the galaxy's inaction.

â€|

****PRESIDIUM COMMONS, MARKET PLACE****

Thane and his son, Kolyat had been spending their time together enjoying diner when the rest of the Normandy crew came along to join them. Kasumi was with them, and was sure to brighten up the mood of the gathering. They sat in a restaurant that overlooked the rivers and the wards, enjoying the variety of asari cuisine available.

"Moreau, what time's the movie gonna be?" Vega asked.

"Uh, in three hours," Joker replied.

"I managed to get into contact with Miranda and Jacob," Kasumi said excitedly. "They'll be here in right aboutâ€| now."

And true to her word, the two former Cerberus Operatives arrived. They had forgone their body suits and arrived in formal clothing appropriate for the occasion. Taylor had a woman with him, Doctor Byrne Cole. Judging from the jewellery on their fingers, they were married or soon to be.

Jacob pulled out a seat for her, before sitting down next to Garrus.

"It is good to see you all again," Thane said. "But what of Zaeed, Tali, and Samara?"

"Last I heard, Zaeed was out on a contract," Vakarain said.

"Creator Tali'Zorah is unavailable as she is attending a summit with her people," Legion supplied. "Samara, I do not know."

The use of 'I' caused a few people to raise their eyebrows. But they ignored it and continued on with the party.

"Shame Shep couldn't be here," Kasumi said.

"Yeah, well, unfortunately she has to do some morale boosting every now and then," Joker sighed.

"Shepard has arrived at the hall," EDI said as she projected a live video feed above the table for everyone to see.

"Yeesh," Kasumi recoiled, "why would she wear that? I mean, I've seen her dresses and I can definitely vouch for her excellent

tastes."

Miranda murmured in agreement.

"Her style would appeal to most tastes," Traynor said, "I believe she has satin-silk dresses."

Smaller conversations broke out across the table where people who have never met before, began to discuss what they knew about Shepard.

Thane smiled as he saw these people relax, and talk about a wonderful woman who was a gift to the galaxy. Yes, life was good. But thenâ€| the feed was cut by an explosion. All talking ceased, and eyes remained glued to the screen.

"Oh my god," Cole uttered.

"We need to get their now!" Garrus barked.

Without hesitation, everyone was on the move.

â€|

****LI'SHIER HALL****

"Chief!" Cortana cried. "John!"

The Spartan winced; he breathed in, but felt a fiery burn spread across his back. He had remembered Shepard walking to the balcony to get an iced drink, before he was knocked out by a powerful explosion. Staving off the shock and pain, John grabbed Cortana's hand and stood up from the rubble.

"You're armed right?" the AI asked.

He nodded, drawing a DEW sidearm. Cortana's platform had inbuilt offensive capabilities, she probably had the most firepower right nowâ€| probably. John swept his eyes across the torn surroundings and could see smouldering bodies everywhere.

"Spartan!" the Arbiter called out. Aside from his tattered cape, Thel seemed unharmed thanks to his armour. "Are you injured."

"No. Where's Shepard?"

"I don't know," the AI said. "Move to the balcony."

"Do you have a tag on her?"

"This place is faraday caged, I can't get a signal."

"Sound off!" a voice yelled, it was from an ODST.

An assortment of slurred cries and clear voices rang out. Medics and drones immediately went to prioritise casualties.

"Shepard!" John called.

No reply.

"Chief!" Adrian bellowed, "Palmer's been hit!"

Quickly the group swung round the central bar and found Palmer slump against the counter with a rebar through her stomach. Arca had torn off a segment of her chest to halt the bleeding.

"How is she?" John asked.

"She's going into shock," Gabriel answered, monitoring his former CO's vital via tacpad.

"Have you seen Shepard?"

"Shit, she's missing?" Riley swore.

John nodded. His eyes scanned across the hall just to be sure he hadn't missed anything.

"I last saw her going to the balcony," Palmer slurred.

"Check the Balcony, Arca, wait here until a medic arrives," the Spartan ordered.

"Got it," he turned his gaze back to Sarah. "Hey, just stay with me for a few minutes longer. Shit we're losing her."

"I'll get a medic," Thorne said, running off.

John pushed towards the balcony, vaulting over any obstacle in his way. Upon leaving passing through the doors, he saw a number of people having been shot where they stood rather than harmed in the explosion. This was a coordinated attack, the Spartan began to fear for the worst.

"Jane!" he roared.

Still no reply. He felt his pulse rise, and his chest ache. Something was terribly wrong. He turned his gaze skyward and could see the QRF and C-Sec arrive to set up a perimeter.

"Do you think she's been taken?" Cortana asked.

John felt his blood freeze over.

****XXxxXX****

"_We're seeing a stark contrast in behaviour between senior and junior operatives. Juniors attempt to be normal or pretend to be at least, while Seniors are impersonal to extent of unnerving coldness. However, when amongst each other or those who they perceive to be their equal, there is a certain warmth and compassion. We usually see this when Operatives are around Spartan-IIIs"
>_** -Colonel Veronica Dare, assessing Acani Operatives.**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Well whaddya think guys? Please review | copiously and let me know.****

****Thanks.****

51. To Break an Angel

****A/N: Hello againâ€|****

****XXxxXX****

"Supremacy_ and _Endless_, sounds fitting,"
>****Vice Admiral Richard Lash, commenting on the christening of the two Omnipotent-class warships****

****XXxxXX****

****UNKNOWN LOCATION****

They're coming right? They've got to be coming.

Shepard winced and doubled over as the pain became too much to bear. They had stripped her off her clothing, leaving her only in the N7 shorts and singlets she wore underneath. They were methodical, professional, and downright monsters. The way they movedâ€| the way they talkedâ€| the way how they played the game, Jane knew that they were ONI, or a rogue cell. No one could've pulled off an attack like that. No one could've knocked her out that fast... unless they had been trained by ONI.

She knew why people feared the Organisation. They were precise, efficient and undeniably brutal in their methods. But on the flip side, they were justified, they were still human. Only humans are capable of such cruelty, such brutality.

Lying on the cold metal floor, Jane wondered how many people had been killed. Her clothes had been torn, and her body was bruised. Without any biomass lying around, there wasn't much the nanites could do to heal her. The grey doors in front of her parted open and she looked into the hallway. The decorations stood in contrast to the interrogation room. It was luxurious with an orange-yellow cream wall and white highlights, different the metallic grey that surrounded her. She concluded that she was on a luxury environment of some kind.

Rule number one, remain calm. Don't let them break you.

A number of people entered the room, black hoods covering their faces. Their eyes were hidden by the polarised lenses perched atop of their noses. A figure, which Shepard assumed to be a woman, began walking towards her. She was about Jane's size, give or take a few centimetres.

"Hello, Shepard," she said in an arrogant voice.

Jane felt her veins boil as she knew who the voice belonged to.

"Osman," she growled.

"Oh, so strong," Serin patronised in a sickly sweet voice. She turned

back to the two men that flanked her. "Break her."

Fuck.

Jane had been trained to resist interrogation, but she knew that she wouldn't outlast an Arcani Operatives. Not by a longshot. She was trained as a soldier, not an asset. In her heart of hearts, she knew that there was a strong possibility she could be broken. This was going to be hell.

Grabbed by the arms, Shepard was hauled onto the central table. Immediately, she was tied down, unable to move. She felt her heart drop when she realised what they were going to do. Looking straight up into the overhanging lights, she felt someone wrap a cloth in front of her face, and hold it tightly down.

"Flush her," a man said.

She knew from the way they moved that they were ONISAD. Another man walked up to her chest with a bucket of water sloshing in his hands and dumped the icy cold liquid onto the cloth. Jane's eyes widened as she felt her supply of air diminish. She tried to squirm as water surged down her throat, but it was no use. She was pinned.

All thoughts of rationality and reasoning disappeared from Jane's mind as he began to drown. She knew they wouldn't kill her, but it was very difficult trying to fight off evolution's warning system. Jane tried to find a shred of consciousness to hold on, a place to focus her mind. But she couldn't.

Her ears barely registered the third man place a board on her stomach, and began to hit it repeatedly. Jane's body shuddered and jerked as the shockwave tore through her. Shepard's stomach was crying out in sheer pain as the Arcani Operative began to rain punches down on her.

She could feel her mind slipping as darkness began to encroach on her vision. But just as she was about to fade out, the punches stopped coming, and the water stopped flowing. They removed the board and the cloth, allowing some small measure of respite. Shepard began to cough, letting it wrack her body as water spurted out of her. But it hurt, every time her chest moved, it would pull on her heavily abused stomach.

"Next phase," an Operative said dispassionately. Despite their visors covering their faces, Jane knew that only dead eyes were staring at her.

The Operatives grabbed more buckets of water, and immediately dumped the steaming contents uncaringly. The liquid was hot, and painful, but not enough to leave a mark.

"Fuckers!" Shepard roared. Her clothes clung to her shapely figure, making her extremely uncomfortable. She tried to move but the warm water was a nuisance.

This time an Operative extended shower faucets from the mesh that dangled above. Jane's body immediately went rigid as a torrent of cold water cascaded all over her. She heard a fan spin on somewhere, and soon felt the cold air roll over her.

Focus! Her mind roared.

This was not like her N7 Training. Sure they put the candidates through hell, but the technique the ONISAD Operatives were using was meant to break Spartans. As soon as her body acclimatised to the cold, the water and fan was shut off instantly.

The Operatives retrieved two menacing nails fused into wires. Upon seeing the Operative march slowly towards her, Jane's heart dropped even further. But he was just a temporary distraction, she didn't see another move to her arm with a syringe.

Shepard screamed as loud as she could as she felt a caustic agent surge through her veins. Her left arm went numb, and he moved to other. Jane tried to wrench her arm free, but it was held down by composite materials. The interrogator attempted to jab the needle into her vein, but the constant moving caused him to tear it entirely.

Jane gritted her teeth, that kind of pain was more bearable. But she knew that this was just a minor hindrance. Instead of injecting her with the agent, the Operative just opted to smash the vial over her knee. Shepard screamed in agony. Augmentations or not, that compound was designed to be used against superhumans.

"Next phase," the leader of the team said.

"You fucking assholes!" Shepard roared.

The aforementioned Operative with the nails moved to her legs. With both sharp implements held firmly in his hands, he rammed them into Shepard's thighs with a sickening pop. Jane winced but didn't cry out.

It's not that badâ€¦| fuck it, I'm only kidding myself.

Upon hearing the flick of a switch, Shepard felt all of her nerves set on fire. She screamed in absolute agony, back arching and throat strained. Electricity coursed through her, robbing her control over her muscles. Jane had never felt more vulnerable but enraged in her life. She hated being pinned.

But then, as quick as it came, the flow of energy stopped. Jane breathed labouredly as she tried to recover. But when she felt her stomach drop, she feared the worst. The table section Shepard was on, immediately dropped into a tub of water. She tried to move, tried to breath, but all she could do was watch the clear water to pink with her blood.

Panic was about to overwhelm her, but Shepard forced herself to calm down with whatever will power was left. The Operatives raised the table out of the water again, allowing Jane to breathe once more.

In her heart of hearts, she knew they were capable of more than this, and she was going to experience everything they had in the book. Only sounds of her ragged breaths and dripping water filled the room.

The Operatives undid the straps, pulled out the nails and pushed her onto the floor. Her singlet was caught on a hook and was torn cleanly

as her body splashed onto the puddles. Jane tried to move, but her arms barely responded. She heard the men leave the room, and decided just to lie on the ground, with her wet brown hair clinging to her face.

She began to wonder how long she would last.

****XXxxxXX****

****SERPENT NEBULA, CITADEL II, PRESIDIUM COMMONS****

"_Just recently there has been an attack on Li'Shier Hall, where a ceremony celebrating the Alliance becoming a vassal for the UNSC was held. We have confirmed reports that a number of Senior Officers have been killed with Commander Jane Shepard amongst the missing. Speculation have led us to believe that this attack was in protest of humanity merging in to become a larger conglomerate. So far, no one has yet to claim responsibilityâ€¦|"_

Palmer turned the TV screen off. The apartment was once again silent. It served as an Operations HQ for ONI in the region. So far, all the people on rotation were working overtime to try and pinpoint where Shepard could be. Sarah watched as analysts rush from desk to desk, or typing frantically away at a console, trying to find a lead or a pattern.

Keyes was here too with Liara, whom was using her contacts to try and locate the Commander. Everyone had a stake in losing Shepard, some more personal than others.

"Sir," a young desk jockey called. He was of African descent, no older than twenty-eight.

"Ben?" Essingdon answered.

"C-Sec has set up a blockade, but haven't allowed us to contain the station."

"Fuck," Keyes swore.

Adrian was leaning against the wall, with his hand resting on his chin. Sarah could tell that he was in deep thought, running through all the possibilities.

"Thoughts?" she asked.

"They would've thrown Shepard into a Faraday cage when they took her away, that's why we can't catch a trace," he listed, "transport would have to be civilian or luxury. Luxury would seem more logical, allows them to pass of high power and black spots without raising suspicion."

Essingdon gained momentum from Adrian's analysis.

"SkySentry hasn't detected any unauthorised slipspace jumps. Transport would've done a normal FTL."

"We do have dark spots," Sandman added. "They could've done the FTL jump, and then used slipspace to get away."

"They could be anywhere if that's the case," Liara gasped.

Donnie brought up the central projector displaying the galactic map. Terminus Systems were highlighted in red and green. Signifying that it could be a likely place to where Shepard could be held

"Bekenstein?" Thorne suggested. "Or have the Reapers gotten to them?"

"Bekenstein is relatively untouched," Keyes said, examining the map. He brought up the Boltzmann system and evaluated the Coalition forces stationed there. It was mostly UNSC Regulars, no Special Forces were on site, save for a few units of Airborne and ODST. But they weren't rated for Special Missions.

"The planet is considered to be the Alliance's Illium, or our Lesser Ark," Cortana added, walking around the display.

Signs of extreme stress were prevalent as people began finding seats and entering twitches. Shepard was considered to be a symbol. She brought hope to those who had none. She restored security to those who lacked it. For her to be gone, it would be a sore blow to the rest of the galaxy.

"Keyes," John began, looking at the man dead in the eye. "Have SkyWatch search ever ship and every house regardless we have clearance or not. They're going to use Shepard as leverage against us."

Essingdon gave a slight nod. Everyone could only imagine what kind of hell Shepard would be going through. A rogue ONI Cell had taken her, and they were going to break her, make an example of her.

Keyes walked towards the window, starrng out over the Citadel.

"Sir, we have an incoming message from Admiral Anderson," Ben said.

"Patch him through."

****XXxxXX****

"_There are lots of ways to break a personâ€¦ we just find that it's more efficient to use electricity than a knife."
>_**-Carbon, talking about interrogation**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** So if none of you have noticed it by now, but ****_**Unto Legend**_****, will be my next main project after I finished ****_**Lost Legacy**_****. And to those who've been with me since ****_**Humanity's Legacy**_****, I will be returning to that soon too.******

****Anyway, please review.****

****A/N:** I just read ****_**Silentium**_**** MIND EQUALS BLOWN! Thank you Greg Bear for making the novel coincide with what I had originally planned.**

****XXxxXX****

"_Most people these days don't even know what the Flood is. I mean sure, you have movies about Flood and whatever, but they're like the Rambo-style Zombie movie. The reality is much worse than what you see on screen. The average person walking down the street doesn't even know what a Gravemind is, let alone heard of it. If an outbreak does occur let's hope to god we're fast enough to act before someone does something stupid."

>_**_Doctor Amanda Thorkais, to Doctor Delilah Orton**_

****XXxxXX****

****BEKENSTEIN, BOLTZMANN SYSTEM, SERPENT NEBULA****

The Flood was coming, there was no denying it. Margaret could feel them getting closer. She had devoted decades to prepare and strengthen against the parasite. But most of it had been undone. She had become too overconfident in her abilities to contain situations and keep things under the radar. She should have put it into ONI's records; she should've passed it by with High Command. But they would've rejected it, said that the more resources were required to pacify the Insurrectionism and contain minor outbreaks.

The irony of it all wasn't lost on her. She had rerouted billions to revive Shepard, and billions to keep certain terror cells afloat. It was easier to fight a known enemy rather than an unknown one. Made life easier for ONISAD to track down and kill the rebels.

Margaret walked over to the windows of the safe house and placed her hands against the glass. Gazing at her own reflection, she had to admit that Keyes had improved living standards of the Coalition significantly. After all, she no longer looked old and frail.

"_Coalition forces are on high alert after an attack which killed several senior officers and diplomats from the Alliance and the UNSC. Commander Jane Shepard, an exemplary_"

She turned the monitor off as she sat down on the couch. It would be so much easier to just disappear and condemn the galaxy to the Flood. But she wasn't made that way. Despite her fears, her ambitions and her personal vendettas, she ultimately wanted _humanity_ to survive whatever the cost.

Upon hearing the doors open, Margaret pulled herself up and straightened out her blouse. Fourteenth Element walked in, clad in civilian clothing. Between them, they held a woman who Parangosky had been at odds with for a very long time.

"Margaret!" Halsey spat.

"Catherine, always a pleasure," she replied neutrally.

"What do you want?" the scientist growled.

Parangosky ignored the question. "Your son is brilliant man, Catherine. But he is also unwilling to do what is necessary to survive."

"Maybe he is!"

The Operatives sat Halsey down in an expensive armchair. She had her hands cuffed, but still looked dignified and powerful. In this day and age, the words of a person could cost more lives than their actions.

Margaret's shoes clicked along the marble floor as she walked off the white rug. "You and I both know that Essingdon lacks what is necessary to do what you and I do."

"Jealous that he took your job?" Catherine sneered.

"Oh so contrived," Parangosky muttered. "We know the Flood is coming. It's clear from the start that they have been waiting for us. Waiting for that prime moment on the Citadel."

"Why are you doing this?" Halsey breathed as a wave of emotions passed through her.

"It's obvious isn't it? For humanity to survive, sacrifices must be made."

"How do you even know the Flood is coming on such a scale you believe?"

"Bindur is a clear indication, and so was the Citadel. The synthesis event was to bridge the gap between synthetic and organic life. Nothing is safe from the Flood now."

Halsey shifted her gaze the floor.

"This was never about politics," Parangosky continued.

"You," Catherine growled accusingly. "It had always been you, from the very beginning. Everything was orchestrated by you! Those inhumane experiments that you made Cerberus do, you wanted to control the Reapers to fight the Flood."

"Don't you dare tell me what is humane and what isn't!" Margaret hissed.

The Operatives stepped back as the former ONI Director stood over Halsey. The two were locked in an intense staring contest, they're eyes filled with anger and rage.

Catherine slowly shook her head, her black hair swaying around her. "There's more to thisâ€¦ I know you. You'd never go to this far just unless there was something in it for you."

That seemed to strike something deep within Parangosky, forcing her to back off and look back out the windows.

"The attack on Northfold, subjecting Arcani's to be your lapdogs, finding a way to control the Reapersâ€¦ all of it in the name of

humanity?" Halsey scoffed. "My Spartans endured hell, but I made sure that they would live to protect us. You, what have you done? All you've done is to satisfy your egoâ€¦ all in the name of humanity."

Margaret made no reply as Catherine's eyes continued to bore through her. "Leave us," she said to the Fourteenth Element.

"Omega was your ace in the hole to kill off as many ONISAD Operatives who were not loyal to you. You wanted them out of the way because they were a threat to you. You delayed our return to Earth so that Cerberus could work just a bit longer. How far is this going to go, Margaret? Are you just doing things now to save your own hide?"

"Catherine," Parangosky snarled, turning around. "There are millions of Reapers out there, out there in dark space. But why haven't we seen them yet? Why have the Reapers gone quiet all of a sudden, most of them have disappeared without a trace. The Flood is here! Last month the Reapers asked to have an armistice."

"Then what do you hope to accomplish?" Halsey said, as if Margaret's plans were a fruitless ambition.

"The Flood has spread far and wide, well beyond our galaxy. Now they return to finish what they have started."

"Then how does this?" Halsey fulminated, "How is what you're doing going to stop them?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

As stupid as it had sound, Parangosky had aimed to capture someone who was loyal or close to Keyes and use that person as a distraction. She needed to keep his attention elsewhere so she could focus on her main planâ€¦ a large scale version of the Redeker plan which had been appropriately dubbed, Redeker-Parangosky Variant Plan.

Catherine's eyes widened in horror. "And you call me a monster!"

"Ah, there's your famed intelligence," Margaret said nonchalantly. "You finally understand why. I never just had one plan. Treat the Flood as if you were treating the Insurrectionists. I will let the Flood propagate through certain _logical_ areas of the galaxy, allowing us to concentrate our forces."

The logic in the plan was heavily based of the Forerunner's experiences against the Flood, but it had a fundamental error. The Flood adapted, what's to say that they could circumvent the plan?

"They are called the Flood for a reason Margaret. Are you willing to risk the existence of all life?"

Parangosky scoffed. "It's the only way to fight the Flood, Catherine. I'm just giving us a head start. Because in the end, your son will be forced to do the same thing."

â€¦

Shepard shivered as the fans began to blast her. She lay on the cold floor, her body bruised, burned and torn. But she wasn't broken, not yet. Jane had lost track of time, she couldn't tell how long she had been a captive. Every hour of ever torture session, she tried to hold on, tried to resist. But she could feel herself losing the battle.

These techniques were designed to break Spartans, to break Arcani Operatives. What chance could she possibly have against such relentless assault? In fact, Jane was surprised she even lasted this long.

Johnâ€¦ he's comingâ€¦ I hope he's coming. He has to be. They've got to beâ€¦ just hold out a little longer.

She closed her eyes, attempting to heal whatever she could. But when she heard the doors open again, she felt her spirit diminish.

Her vision was hazy, and her senses were erratic at best. She saw a woman with her hands cuffed, pushed into the room.

"What have you done to her?" the woman roared.

The doors closed, none of the Operatives said a word.

Shepard's eyes fluttered as her chest rose and fell. Her clothes were torn, soaked and covered in blood. She tried focusing on the woman's face; she had black hair, grey blue eyes and a striking complexion.

"D-Doctor H-Halsey?" Jane gasped. It was so hard to talk, her throat was so raw.

"Shhhh," Catherine hushed, "save your strength."

Shepard was too tired to argue; she closed her eyes and drifted off into an uneasy slumber.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE**_**

Essingdon was tired, he needed some sleep, and maybe a few hours of shut eye would help. As a Spartan-IV his body didn't require sleep to recover, but his mind did. Nanites helped improved bodily functions while the positronic brain increased body resistance to malignant influences on a molecular scale whilst enhancing the neural interface. And it was because of that, it caused the mind to tire out.

He had probably been awake for the past four days attempting make sense of Parangosky's action. The looming Flood threat wasn't helping either. To sum it up, he was under a lot more stress and pressure than any other of his predecessors.

Hell, he was so engrossed in trying to clean up after the former director that he didn't even notice that Liara came up to himâ€¦ that was bad. It was a sign that he was letting his guard down and that he could be jumped at any time.

"Donnie," she said softly.

"Yes?" Keyes turned away from the holographic display and gave a sot smile. Looking at the Asari's face, he knew something was wrong.

"You're going to burn yourself out, take a quick walk, or something," she said, her voice laced with genuine care.

Essingdon quirked the right side of his lips and shook his head softly.

"She's right," John said, still keeping his blue eyes on the display. He was out of armour looked very human in the way he held himself. He had his arms folded his chest with the sleeves rolled up and a hand resting on his chin. Keyes could tell that the Spartan-II was having no luck in discerning Parangosky's motives.

"Take a walk Don," Adrian said. "We've got it from here."

â€|

John aimlessly scribbled down some notes on a piece of paper. He had worked with ONI before, and so he knew that the best way of finding a link was just to keep on analysing until related items popped up. He knew that trying to find a motive in Parangosky's actions were nigh impossible, so the next best thing was to analyse where she would go.

As he eased himself back into the chair, he straightened out his tie, and looked back at the central display. The only noise that filled the room was the soft hum of hardware, and fingers dancing across mechanical keyboards. It was clear that there were some traditionalists in the room. Adrian was one of them too.

"We'll get her back, John," he said, he rarely used the Spartan's first name.

"I know," the Chief replied.

"Anderson's sending Shepard's original crew to help us," Adrian said, though he sounded like he didn't believe they would help very much.

John however, he had seen them fight first hand. As a team, the _Normandy_ crew was undeniably effective and relentless.

"Have faith in them," the Spartan said, "they're a good team, and loyal to Jane."

Adrian arched an eyebrow, making direct eye contact. But he said nothing of it.

"Johnâ€| Shepard's been captured by rogue ONI."

"I know."

"Then youâ€| "

"I know," the Spartan cut him off. He slowly placed down his pen on the pad, and curled his hand into a fist, squeezing until his flesh turned white. "I know" Adrian.

"We go back a long way," the Operative said, "you know what we are both capable of"

"I know, Adrian. They're just like us."

"They broke me down when they trained me" these men; they haven't built themselves back up yet."

John closed his eyes and breathed. He rubbed his hand along his chin and realised that he needed a shave. But he quickly stuffed those thoughts away. Shepard was out there" in the thralls of "mindless" assassins. She had been missing for over a week now, and as each minute passed, he was getting increasingly worried. No, worry didn't even begin to describe what he felt. He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat" couldn't do anything but try and find her.

Adrian swivelled around on his chair, and clasped both hands together. "She means a lot to you" doesn't she?"

"

****GARDENS****

Riley walked through the main garden on the ship. His tired eyes gazed back and forth over Shepard's original team as they readjusted themselves to new technology. The Operative walked by a tree and noticed that there were a number of gaping holes in them. He took the time to kneel down and inspect them.

"Adrian did that," Palmer said, catching the Operative off guard.

Sandman pivoted his head around. "How's the stomach?"

"A bit sore," she shrugged. Sarah looked over to the team. They were being briefed by Thorne and Fhajad. "Go meet them. They're a good bunch."

"Later, I got to go see someone."

"Okay" then," Sarah said, slightly suspicious. "Who?"

"Corona," he answered neutrally. And with that, he left.

"

Turning her attention away from Sandman, Sarah assessed each and every single person sitting at the large round table. Adrian had provided a dossier on everyone, and a personal assessment summary which he had written or gotten from John. He had detailed key strengths and weaknesses of everyone, and then optimised them for the best group synergy.

Palmer shook her head as she read the reports. He was so meticulous,

leaving nothing to chance. But then again, all Arcani were like that. They left nothing to chance.

Wrex and Grunt sat next to each other, with the former clearly being the mentor for the younger one. They both served as Shepard's heavy hitters. The tank-bred Krogan looked as if he was going to break into bloodlust at any moment; he was literally itching for a fight. John had mentioned in his report that Shepard and Grunt shared a mother-son relationship. Sarah found that to be slightly _cute_, an endearing.

Next was Kasumi Goto. From what John had gathered, she was a master thief. The best, but not the most famous. Sarah wasn't too sure if having a person like that on ONI's flagship was such a good idea. But then again, ONI was an organisation that breeds master assassins.

Thane Krios, Sarah had met before. She found him to be a very spiritual person, especially from an assassin. The Drell and the Arcani Operatives had spent many hours conversing with one another about, well, anything that came to mind. Despite being centuries younger, Krios clearly had more wisdom in how to cope with stress.

Samara, well, Palmer only heard about her over the dinner table. The Justicar was just as spiritual as Krios, but not as detached from taking another life. She was a kind soul and very righteous, but undeniably fanatical about the code. She served as Shepard's vanguard.

Next to the asari, was Jack. John wrote a very detailed report about her psychology and abilities. Her biotic prowess was immense that it was still on par with Shepard's post-augmentation abilities. There was also a post-report included as well. After meeting her on Grissom once more, both Keyes and John had written another document. Both of them said that Jack was an instructor and fiercely protective of her pupils. This was somewhat surprising to Palmer who initialled believed the biotic to be a cold killer.

Tali was much of a nervous wreck this time, she looked up to Shepard like an older sister. And since someone had taken her older sister away, she was _pissed_ to say the least.

Legion's facial expression was unreadable as ever. But his body language clearly indicated that he was concerned for Shepard's wellbeing. The geth had served as Shepard's marksman and tech support.

Javik was just being himselfâ€¦ cynical and shrouded in cold anger.

Mordin Solus sat opposite to Thorne, Sarah read the little footnote that Adrian had written about the salarian. _Just imagine Donnie on coffee, speaking without the cultivated accent_. Palmer smiled at the small joke. Good to see that the man still had some humour left.

Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor sat beside each other, wearing loose fitting clothing that was made for strenuous activities such as combat. The report that John had written stated that they wore

skin-tight Cerberus uniforms. Palmer could only imagine their horror when they realised that they were a part of an unauthorised and illegal ONI black ops program.

There was Vega as wellâ€¦ enough said about him. Sarah found his outward personality to be endearing, much like her late brother. But sometimes, it could prove to be a little too much. Cortez, she liked more, he was quiet and always got the job done.

Finally, there was Zaeed Massani. John's report about the merc could be summed up into; _the man's an insane badass_.

As Sarah sat down next to Samara, Fhadjad was busy explaining the situation and bringing everyone up to speed. The mere mention of the Parangosky's name brought anger and sheer contempt to everyone's eyes. The Spartan-II made no attempt to mask his lecture. ONI Officers walked by as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. Most of them were tired from cleaning up after the former Director.

Another woman soon arrived; she had blonde hair, and attractive features. Her voice sounded very similar to EDI's, minus the synthesised component. Colonel Veronica Dare had just been recently appointed as Operations Manager of ONISAD-SOG.

"Dare," Fhadjad greeted, "news?"

"I'm going to be overshadowing First Element, they're dropping into a critical red zone. Going to need some support groups on standby."

"I'll forward it to Keyes."

â€¦

****OBSERVATION DECK****

Essingdon sat in one of the leather chairs, gazing out of the viewport. He and Liara sat silently as they watched hundreds of ships and habitats go by. As per the Coalition's promise, the Citadel had been rebuilt to exact specifications all free.

"Have your contacts gotten anything?" Keyes asked.

"Donnieâ€¦ just relax for a moment," Liara said, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Shepard's been taken by Arcani assetsâ€¦ she could beâ€¦"

"I know, Donnie," T'Soni said softly, "but you're going to burn yourself out. I'm worried about her too. It's frustrating being one step behind."

Don closed his eyes as Liara's hand brush against his. He was tired from trying to find a motive in Parangosky's actions, trying to find a reason, a pattern in an otherwise mess. He hated being left behind while his opponent outsmarted him. And with the Flood threat looming over, his wellbeing was deteriorating. If he could just get Parangosky out of the way, he could focus more of ONI's efforts against the parasite.

Lasky and Hood had already initiated safeguards against an outbreak, but Keyes knew it wouldn't be enough. Earlier evidence had suggested that Parangosky was planning to take control over the Reapers, thus bolstering UNSC Naval Forces exponentially. But it was too ambitious and it was done "alone", there had to be an ulterior motive. The former Director didn't just want the millions of Reaper ships solely for combatting the Flood. There had to be another reason. Keyes couldn't accept anything less.

"Excuse me, sir," Haverson interrupted. The AI appeared on a nearby pedestal.

"Go ahead," Keyes said.

"Message from Anna Greenfieldâ€| she says it's most urgent."

"Patch it through."

Unbeknownst to most, Essngdon had promoted Anna to Deputy Director; someone had to take Osman's place after all. And that someone had to be a person Keyes could rely on.

An overhanging project sparked to life and displayed Greenfield's picture in perfect quality. She had a sad and defeated look on her face.

"Anna."

"Essingdon," she breathed, "your mother's gone missing. She failed to check in, and I sent a team to her apartmentâ€| the place was ransacked. I'm so sorry."

Keyes felt something grip his chest. His eyes glazed over, and it was in that brief moment that he realised the gravity of it all. He had stumbled into the belly of the beastâ€| and he was losing. Parangosky had taken his mother, he had no concrete evidence to support that claim, but he felt it in his gut.

"We've managed to uncover more of her linksâ€|"

"Ground all non-critical operations," Keyes ordered; his voice cold and strong. He raised himself from his seat, and looked at Anna directly in the eye. "Cripple every rebel group, every terror cell, every goddamn corporation Parangosky has a share in. I want her gutted."

"You got it Donnie," Anna said without hesitation.

Keyes had just given her a blank check to get payback on the woman that killed Edmund, and she was going to make sure every credit would go a very long way.

****XXxxXX****

****FRINGES OF GALACTIC SPACE, ORION ARM, NEW ANGELES (CRITICAL RED ZONE) â€" FIRST ELEMENT DEPLOYMENT****

Rainâ€| it was always raining on this cesspit of a colony. It was one of the many hundreds of forgotten worlds, filled with criminals and

the poor. Slipspace jumps in out of these planets were rare due to the interferences from the magnetic storms, not to mention an Aegis Fleet preventing people from leaving. Basically anyone who hated the Coalition or was running away from ONI always ended up here.

The Coalition had no jurisdiction on this planet, and their presence was usually zero. Even PMCs rarely dared to venture out here. They preferred the yellow zones to moderate red. Critical red, well, that was where pirates, warlords and criminals run rampant. They were the dominant parties here, and the Insurrectionists, well, they were the minority.

Scott "Stein" Steiner and his team of six lay under the cover of night, overlooking a Cliffside road. Winds tended to get very heavy here; making flight transportation useless. The Arcani Operatives steeled themselves the rains battering their black CTS suits. They had laid here for the past week, making sure that no one would get the jump on them while they ambushed their target.

"Stein, we've got a convoy rolling in, one hundred meters out," Scout whispered over the COMs.

"Copy. Switch to VISR"

Scott, Glaze and Lau were positioned atop the tunnels, Scout, Mills and Cain laid a sixty meters north-west of their position. The team of six men thus formed an L shape ambush over the road. Their plan was to let the convoy pass through the tunnels and bring down certain sections to divide and conquer their target. But they would have to be fast; the populace of New Angeles loved a good fight with the Coalition. If the team got bogged down, they would be as good as dead.

Usually places like these, the UNSC would leave alone. Especially after what had happened when an ONISAD and SpecWar Joint Task Force attempted to rescue an ARG Operative called Corona. Adrian had lost all of his men in a matter of minutes. The lesson everyone learned that day was a hard one—Arcani weren't bullet proof, and that they had been betrayed.

But Section I's SkySentry had picked up some anomalies, so a SkyWatch done was sent in to investigate. It managed to collect enough intel to make a few veteran analysts drop their morning cup of coffee, and prompt Keyes to deploy six Operatives to New Angeles.

"Convoy is in sight," Lau gestured.

"Get ready," Scott ordered.

Achilles Missile Packs were deployed, and GBRM2 Rifles were set to loud. Stealth was not necessary in this phase of the plan. Besides, there was thunder to drown out the noise.

Operatives made a final sweep of the slums around them. Anything taller than two stories were at least a few kilometres away and they were owned by crime syndicates. That meant that the team would only have to contend with poorly armed and poorly trained militia when they would fight their way out. And that the road would only be used by people with cars, in this case, it was just the convoy and no one else.

The convoy was composed of an ageing fleet of M12 FAV Warthogs, and a freighter with cargo containers that looked far too expensive to have come as standard with the vehicle.

"Tagging package," Glaze uttered as he marked the trucks.

The guards riding in the Hogs were armed with the AD15 Assault Rifle, sold and mass produced by Aegis Defence Contracts. The weapon was crude, inaccurate, but tough and rarely jammed. It made one hell of a noise when fired, and was barely customisable. AD17s outpaced these rifles by far, and it was clear why.

Aegis operated in similar areas like these, they needed some kind of edge over their opponent. So instead of letting pirate groups make their money off black market UNSC weapons, Aegis could sell them the cheap AD15s at a very low price, benefiting both parties mutually.

But as ugly and inaccurate the weapon was, Scott knew that it dominated in dense areas. Its high stopping power and high rate of fire made it a force to be reckoned with. So the team would have to take the convoy out quickly.

Stein analysed the convoy's formation. The road had three lanes on each side, so the columns of vehicles were using this to their advantage. Three Hogs were out in front in a wedge formation, backed up by two infantry carriers, and a Gauss Hog. The large freighter was in the centre of formation, covered by six warthogs with their guns aimed outwards. The rearguard of the convoy was one infantry carrier, and four Hogs.

Whatever cargo they were hauling, it must be worth a fortune. Scott shuddered at the thought of them hauling a NOVA. He couldn't care less if the thing went off, but he'd rather that it occur when he and his men were at least a light year away. But it was the thought of them getting their hands on such a powerful weapon that made him _scared_.

"Lead group is entering the tunnels," Mills said, eye on the drone feed.

"Execute, execute!" Scott ordered.

He felt a dull thump as the charges inside the tunnels were detonated. Concrete, mason and metal came crashing down on the forward Warthogs as the lights went out, crushing the occupants inside. That was why the UNSC upgraded; too many lives had been lost due to stray fire and RPGs. The newer Hogs were bigger, more resilient and had doors and two of them were waiting for the team behind a couple of rocks.

Scout immediately let the Achilles fly. The devastating short-short range missiles found their marks, and ripped up the rearguard with thunderous force. Men were thrown like ragdolls from their vehicles, screaming to their deaths. The roads lacked a guard rail, so the Infantry Carrier veered off the cliff and crashed into the shanty houses below.

Mills began to let fly with his modified Grim, showering the enemy

troops with devastatingly accurate fire. The militia sprinted back and forth between the overturned Hogs, firing half-hearted shots before they were torn apart by Cain and his Epirus Sniper Rifle.

The hyper velocity rounds just ripped through them, rendering them into a smeared pulpy mass in less than a heartbeat. And in under a minute, the entire convoy was out of action. Stein, Glaze and Lau, fast roped down the tunnel entrance and flicked on their lights while Scout and his group moved to provide security.

Scott took point and carefully combed through the entangled wreck of warthogs. The freighter was still intact, just like the team had planned.

"Hey," Lau called, nudging a Jackal with his boot, "looks like some of the Covies were with these guys."

The Covenant had splintered a long time ago. Most groups fought each other, while others settled down on the forgotten planets. New Angeles was like Venezia in many ways, except it was far more dangerous and unpredictable. Scott knew that critical redzones still lacked sorely in technology. Whatever Brutes, Grunts or Jackals that lived on this planet, all of them would've "learnt" the Human-Covenant War from the history books. But it would've been twisted into the UNSC/Separatist-Insurrectionist/Covenant War. The aliens existed "peacefully" with the humans here.

"Check the cargo," Scott ordered.

Glaze complied and pulled out an energy buzzsaw. Lau and Stein took up covering positions and Glaze worked to remove the locks. Showers of sparks and molten metal were sent flying onto the heavily neglected road as the blade burned through the composite metal and scrapped away the ceramic plates.

"Stein, might want to hurry it up in there," Scout said over the COM. He was watching the teams' helmet cams.

"Sit rep, gentlemen," it was Dare over the Super Luminals.

"Convoy has been stopped, we're taking a look at the package now," Scott answered.

Lau and Glaze pulled open the container, careful not to touch the red hot metal as they revealed the cargo. Scott stepped into the hold and looked around.

"Command, are you getting this?"

"Copy that Echo-One," Dare said, "Analysts are taking a look at it right now."

Scott brushed his gloved finger tips over a crate and opened it. Inside was a glass canister supported by hydrostatic foam.

"Is thatâ€¦ narcotics?" Lau asked incredulously.

Stein frowned and shook his head. He lifted the optics over his eyes to analyse it further.

"It's a powder of some kindâ€¦ like dried meat," he said, perplexed.

A low buzzing alerted Scott to a pulsing red light in the far end of the cargo hold. The canister in his hand began to his open, and pumped out the powder.

Foreign contaminant, rolled out over Stein's HUD.

"Oh shit! Bomb!" he roared.

"Get out of there Echo-One!" Dare ordered.

Stein, Glaze and Lau sprinted out of the tunnel, vaulting over dead bodies and torn vehicles. Their boots dug into the heavily worn out road as they rounded the bend and hugged the rock walls. A low rumble shook throughout the Cliffside.

Scott switched to Scout's camera feed, and saw a green mist flooding over the edge and into the slums below.

"What the hell is that?" Mills bellowed.

A normal gaseous agent would've been snuffed out by the heavy rain, but the green mist just rolled through as if the sky was clear.

Glaze and Lau moved back onto the road and took up firing positions, keeping their sights trained on the mist. Stein peered round the corner, and watched in fascination as the mist began to mind to the dead bodies.

"Command, are you getting this?" he whispered into the COMs.

Dare replied in a cold and serious voice. "Echo-One, getâ€¦ the _fuck_ out of there right now!"

No one on the team needed to be told twice. The mangled bodies from the wrecks began to howl and moan. Bone splintered and muscles were torn as the assimilated corpses wrenched themselves free from the wreck.

"Flood!" Scout cried.

Scott lined up his sights and aimed for centre mass. Regardless of how the host had been assimilated, double tap was the best way to take them down. One round in the chest and one in the head would ensure that the infectious form and the brain would be destroyed, incapacitating the body for a decent amount of time.

But since these bodies were resurrected from microscopic spores and/or powders, then the chest shot should sever something important anyway. The Operative squeezed the trigger in quick succession, barely feeling the recoil.

The closest combat form collapsed under the hail of precision fire, it's upper mass torn to bloodied shreds. Lau, Glaze and Stein spread out onto the road and kept a steady rate of fire. They prioritised rifles first, targeting the AD15 Rifles first before engaging the combat form. Dozens of rounds punched through the weapons and into

soft targets. The rifles clattered useless onto the ground, warped and destroyed by hyper velocity bullets.

Scout and his team moved along the ridge line and fired upon the Flood, providing covering fire for Stein and his team to make it back to the safety of the rocks. Flood forms sprinted after them, roaring in the winds and thrashing their tentacles about. The ones with functioning legs leapt over the boulders, defying gravity.

Scott shot and assimilated Brute whilst it was in mid-flight. Grim just tore through the alien's chest, showering the ground with pale flesh and green blood. The Operative retreated back up to higher ground as the ape-like creature came crashing down on a sharp rock, shattering its skull and painting the ground in brains.

Upon reaching the plateau, the group made a mad dash towards the waiting M14A2 Warthogs. Scott jumped into the passenger seat, while Glaze sat behind the wheel and Lau on the gun. The Operative was forced to pull out his sidearm and shoot a human combat form which had managed to crawl after them. One round through the head was all it took to stop it.

The two Hogs speed down the dirt road, kicking mud onto the hood. Stein listened intently as Dare began to issue orders.

"Move to the tertiary evac point. I'm sending reinforcements."

Stein switched the COMs off, and readied his rifle. He opened up the rear panel of the Grim, and inserted the DEW component before adding a Catalyst module.

"You know we have to go through the slums right?" Glaze asked.

Scott nodded. "Let's hope we get back home in one piece."

Scout's Warthog closed the gap between the two vehicles. They needed to keep their formation tight if they were going to pull through alive. Already, militia and Covenant combatants had swarmed out of the houses and started to open fire.

Scott's optics highlighted the threats in red—it scared him

Most of the weapons were ageing ballistics weapons which just bounced off the Hogs' armour. Lau swung the turret to bear on the rooftops and pulled the trigger. The thunderous electrical roar filled the air as the weapon unloaded a devastating torrent of fire.

Scott could see dozens of hostiles be torn and burned to a smouldering mess by the weapon. But no one shied away from the fight. They just kept on coming, intent on killing the UNSC's Assassins.

"RPG!" Lau roared.

Glaze banked the vehicle wildly, crashing through an empty street vendor. Bits of wood and metal shattered against the reinforced glass. The RPG sailed overhead and detonated _harmlessly_ inside a house.

"Floor it!" Scott ordered.

Glaze slammed his boot down on the pedal, shooting through the slums. Militia continued to jump out from wherever they could, firing whatever they had. Some had even resorted to hurling flaming oil onto the road.

"They've got a roadblock!" Lau cried.

"Then shoot it!"

Scout moved his Warthog to the left, allowing both gunners to concentrate fire on roadblock. Mills leaned out of the vehicle hefting an Achilles Missile launcher. A plume of smoke erupted from the launcher, trailing behind the warhead. The missile ran true, lighting up the blockade in a brilliant ball of fire. The Hogs' engines roared as it pushed the vehicles over the mound of twisted metal and earth.

"RPG on the rooftops!" Scout warned.

"Which rooftop?" Cain grunted.

"All of them!" Scott interrupted.

"How much further until evac?" Lau gasped.

"Ten clicks," Glaze answered.

"You've gotten to be fucking kidding me! We're going straight through the fucking city?"

No one answered. Out of all the places they could've gone through, it had to be the CBD, built back when the UNSC still had a strong presence on the planet.

"I swear to god that New Angeles will be a fucking breeding ground for Flood Combat forms," Mills cursed.

Scott looked in the rear view mirror and could see the green mist growing larger in size. Already fire from the rear was beginning to slacken as the militia turned their attention elsewhere.

"Thank god their not organised," Cain breathed.

Glaze swerved the Hog around the corner and slammed straight into a Brute. The bumper bars ripped the massive alien apart, smearing blood and gore over the windows. Scott instinctively switched on the windshield wipers and energy shields.

"That's going to make us more visible," Glaze commented.

"As if we weren't visible already!" Scott rebutted.

A bright violet lance of energy glanced out from one of the hillside slums. The shot was accurate as it splashed onto the energy shields installed near the windows.

"I take back what I said," Glaze apologised.

The volume of militia increased exponentially. Scott could even see

Human-Covenant War Era weapons being brought back into action. Dozens of spiker and needler rounds glanced off the shields. Some of the fighters however were unfortunate enough to get hit by the ricochets instead. They were untrained and messy at best, scores of them would've just been killed by friendly crossfire alone.

However, as soon as they broke from the slums, the group entered the woodlands. Anti-personnel mines went off at a consistent interval as the hogs drove over them at high speeds.

"Banshees inbound!"

The howl of the sky predators had been masked by the storm, but thankfully Cain and Lau had been keeping their eyes peeled. Plasma rounds splashed across the shimmering gold surface of the Hogs as a trio of Banshees swooped in on a gun run. But the rain had dampened the bolts so much that it barely drained the shields at all.

"You'd think they'd go to ground zero!" Scout gritted.

The turrets turned to bear on the fliers, ripping them out of the sky in a ball of purple fire. Scott knew that they were now entering warlord territory now. But it was a package deal thankfully. The Warlords may be better equipped and trained, but there were going to be plenty of civilians around who would get in the way.

Breaking from the tree line, the M14A2s speed through the well-kept streets with such audacity. The gunners had to keep their fire restrained now. But at least there was a lot less people shooting at them now.

Scott flicked on the TEAMCOM. "Prep for self-destruct, we're going to swim out of here."

****XXxxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**SWIFT WINDS, **_**BEKENSTEIN, BOLTZMANN SYSTEM, SERPENT NEBULA â€" TWO DAY LATER****

Just hours ago, Halsey and Shepard's tags reappeared on the SkyWatch Network. There was a slight sense of relief in the air as everyone had finally located the missing VIPs, but John felt that there was something off. In fact, they all felt it.

Keyes had ordered drones and Griffins to make continual sweeps over the area just to make sure there weren't any traps. Preliminary results showed that the room that the two women were held in, was Faraday caged.

"Chief," Miranda Keyes said kindly.

"Keyes," he returned with equal sincerity.

"If you find the bitch, give her my regards."

"I will."

Last minute preparations were in order as the team prepared for the grab. Essingdon wouldn't be able to join them on the mission for logistical and protocol reasons. He looked like he was dying to go

too. But no, he had to stay on board the ship and coordinate resources. Already First Element had reported a Flood outbreak on New Angeles.

However, since ONI had no right being on the planet in the first place, Keyes had decided to station a group of Prowlers to engage anything leaving the planet. The locals would have to fend for themselves.

John knew how heavy things were going to get now. _So much for shore leave_, he pondered. Once they busted Shepard and Halsey out, everyone abled body would be committed into the fight against the Flood.

The Spartan waved everyone over to the display console. Admiral Anderson on board the _Normandy_ and thus attended the meeting via holographic display.

"Aggressive, not reckless," the Spartan began. Everyone was wearing casual clothes, with ultra-light armour tucked neatly away in bags. This was an urban engagement, and the last thing they wanted to do was to scare the living daylight out of civillians.

"We infiltrate via the spaceports, and then acquire transports to get to the house," John explained.

Cortana brought up an intricate model of the five storey mansion and the surrounding areas. The land was at least ten hectares in size, and was located near the heart of the city. The estate was perched on a mountain side, overlooking the CBD and beaches in the valley below.

"Once we reach the house, each team will carry out their objectives. Garrus and Vega, you will provide overwatch from the south. Krios and Taylor, the east. Tali and Legion, the west. Palmer, Lawson and Massani, the north, that's the most difficult position since you will be at the lower elevation," John explained.

No one question the Spartan; everyone listened because he was a born leader.

"Samara and Jack, hit the house from the north, go all out."

"That's what I like to hear," Jack said cheerily, boosting everyone's morale.

"Goto, there are service tunnels that run underneath the campus, we'll need you to disable them."

"Got it."

John turned to the krogans. "Knock on their front doors and give them hell."

"Hehehehehe," Grunt laughed sadistically. John always knew the krogans loved a good fight.

"Liara and Javik, use your biotic abilities to destabilise defensive positions."

"Acknowledged," the Prothean nodded.

The Chief shifted to face the UNSC combatants. "Captain Salas, as soon as we get on site, we need your people to establish perimeter security."

"Consider it done, sir."

"Blaze, Viper, Arca, Briar and Sandman, you're with me," John said, "we'll infiltrate from the east wing and move along the rooftops to clear out the snipers. When we reach the west wing, we'll climb down two floors to grab Shepard and Halsey."

A collection of nods came from the ONISAD Operatives.

"Known enemy forces are Aegis, Eclipse Mercenaries and remaining Cerberus Forces. Stay low, fight smart, and we'll all go home," John reassured. "Let's do this."

****XXxxXX****

"_You've spent years calling the Innies non-humansâ€¦ why the hell are you calling the Flood human now?"
>_**-Drill Sergeant Dave Gryllens, training Airborne Candidates in Flood containment tactics.**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: There we go, I think I've put this story back on track.****

****So I have a few questions to ask.****

****What would you like to see in the future of this story? (Rest assured epic space battles are on the way).
>Is there anything you would like to see happen?
And where do you think this story is heading?***

****Please leave a review and tell me what you think.****

****Thanks****

53. Rising Tides

****A/N: And we're back.****

****XXxxXX****

"_All Arcani assets will undergo secondary passive in order to annul (or change colour of) the glow of the skin caused by the synthesis event. UNSC Servicemen who have been affected by the event can undergo surgery as well."
>_**-GEN Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

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BEKENSTEIN, BOLTZMANN SYSTEM, SERPENT NEBULA

Thane had always imagined the ONISAD Operatives to be reserved and quiet. Well that was true in part, but he had never expected to see them so animated. Their ability to merge in with their social surroundings was astounding. Even John, whom Krios thought to be a calm individual, was able to make himself appear normal.

The moment the men stepped onto a civilian shuttle, they were animated and joked a lot. They discussed politics and current social trends like any other person would. Hell, they even made up stories about each other dating other people. Despite their size or their blue hue, no one gave them a second glance.

"Huntress is in place," Sammi whispered over the COMs.

The Drell could see shuttles move into blocking and orbital positions. It was clear to him that the UNSC prided itself on methodical cohesion.

"Snipers in position," John ordered.

Krios was perched on the rooftop of a very large outlook café. He rested his cheek on the stock of the Black Widow, and stared down the scope. He gently adjusted the dope, and ran through a series of calculations in order to get the maximum accuracy.

Seeing sentries perched upon the roofs, Thane zeroed in and waited for the order.

â€

The infiltration team had made it successful to the house's rooftop undetected under cloak. John was very impressed with ONISAD Urban Operations Equipment. It was very utilitarian in design and minimised all forms signatures such as thermal and electrical. The gear was very modular and allowed Operatives to put them on in mere seconds. The armour was composed of an armoured vest with a neck guard, shoulder pads, combat hood knee-shin guard and gloves, all of which could change its camouflage pattern thanks to nano-tech.

There was a drawback however, and that was significantly less protection, no grav manipulators, no thrusters, no shield manipulation, and of course, no plasma fists. However, Alec had tinkered with Adrian's prosthetic arm, turning it into a devastating close-quarter weapon. The Operative was the exception to the "no-plasma-fist" component.

John had seen Arca's hand disassemble itself into splits, and reform into a menacing silent drill blade. Soft targets would be torn like wet tissue going against a power drill.

"Arca, move to the skylight," the Spartan ordered.

A green acknowledgement light winked on the AR Display. John watched the Operative skilfully dodge a patrol whilst approaching the objective.

"Cortana, hack their COMs."

"Done," the AI replied. "Once you take out the sentries, you'll have

a thirty second window before possible QRFs are alerted."

A small screen popped up in the small corner of John's HUD. It allowed him to hear and see what the enemy was saying over their network.

"In position," Arca whispered.

"Copy," John replied, "Everyone, move in."

Green acknowledgement lights pulsed again. The Spartans silently made their approach to predetermined locations. Snipers on the outside were ready and waiting and the distraction team were just about in place.

"Jack here, we're good to go. Let's make these fuckers pay."

The Chief engaged additional AR layers, allowing him to see everyone's line of sight, field of fire, and current targets. All the snipers had a bead on opposing snipers. The infiltration team had their suppressed weapons pointed at anyone out of the snipers' line of sight, and waiting at their positions.

"Execute! Execute!" John growled.

In a split second, the air filled with accurate shots. Aegis Operatives toppled over as rounds bored through their skulls, painting the flat metal roof in blood.

"Roof top clear," Krios said over the COM.

The radios from the krogans squawked, indicating that they were moving in for the assault. Already, John could hear the not-so-frantic orders from the estate control room.

"Snipers! Take them down!" A woman ordered.

Thorne and Riley moved towards the front and began to fire simunitions at the charging krogans. No one was wearing head cams because this operation was black, but regardless, John could hear the muffled cries and squelching bodies.

"Damn, that looks nasty," Sandman commented.

The Chief turned his attention away from the distraction. Arca had already opened the skyline and moved in a few seconds earlier. Blaze and Viper abseiled into the windows below. Thorne and Riley prepared to abseil into their allocated sectors.

As planned, John vaulted over the pipes and jumped down the opened skyline. Upon landing on the timber floor, he brought up Grim and scanned the immediate area. Arca stood by the cream white walls which were smeared in blood. At the Operatives feet were two bodies killed by headshots.

"Ready when you are," he said.

"Down the hall."

John took point as they moved down the clear, intricately designed

hallway with Adrian covering his six. They made a conscious effort to make a sweep of each room physically. They kicked down the doors, made a quick run, and pulled back out into the hall. No matter how advanced technology got, the counter tech always evolved just as fast. Scans don't always pick up everything, and considering that this was where Parangosky had come to stay, John could risk taking any chances.

The two men pressed on down the hall, but most of the guards had been redirected to deal with the heavy assault from the biotic teams. John could hear Jack ripping through person after person, flinging them against the walls, or bisecting them with an enhanced biotic punch.

Upon reaching an intersection, John swept the corridors before moving to the other side while Adrian covered him. Then the Spartan-II took up a defensive stance while covering the Operative.

"We're clear for now," the Chief said.

"Shepard and Halsey should just be down the hall."

The COMs squawked.

"Chief, area clear," the other infiltrators reported in.

"Copy that, make the sweep, John ordered.

"Roger."

The Chief made a few hand gestures, signalling for Adrian to shift to the left side of the hall. With weapons raised, they pressed on.

"Contact," Arca whispered.

A red outline appeared on John's HUD.

"I got it," he said, lining up his sights.

John waited until the Contractor was within clear sight, and squeezed the trigger. The woman's head snapped violently to her right as the hyper velocity round drill straight through her skull. Her own blood and gore smeared the punched hole on the white wall as she crumbled lifelessly to the ground.

Upon making it the next foyer, Adrian moved to the right, while John hanged to the left. A security checkpoint had been erected, and there was no way around it. There was ten OpFor in total. Four of them were armed with LMGs, two were wielding shotguns, and the rest had assault rifles.

"Marking targets," the Spartan said. He highlighted personnel for Arca to engage. "Make this quick, we're exposed out here."

"Copy."

Silently, the glided across the marble floor, unseen and unheard. The Contractors were becoming edgier by the minute. News of their

colleagues being torn apart wasn't helping their morale.

"Where the fuck is the QRF?" a woman cussed.

John took up an optimal firing position, allowing him maximum field of fire over his targets.

"In position," Adrian indicated.

"Weapons free."

In the amount of time it took a person to blink, ten bodies instantly froze up before blood oozed out from their skulls, and crashed to the ground. Spartans had always been fast, unrivalled in their reaction time. Although Mendez had taught centre-mass shots, the Arcani Program had retrained John to go for headshots whenever possible. Ten cold bodies lay on the marble floor, slumped against whatever they were taking cover behind.

"We're clear," Arca said, "Shepard and Halsey is just down the hall to the left."

Wordlessly, John got back up and reengaged active camo. He vaulted over the overturn furniture and barrelled down the hall with such speed. Adrian trailed closely behind and made sure no one was coming after them.

The two reached an oak wood door, and took up breaching positions on both sides. John scanned the room with his optics, but his heart dropped when he only saw one body.

"I'm getting Halsey's signal," Adrian muttered, "but that's Shepard inside."

Tags from the Spectre and the Scientist were appearing on the scanners, but only one body was revealed, one. And the room, there was something not right about the room. In fact, all the houses had swing doors, instead of the standard metal bulkheads.

"We're going in."

John readied his rifle as Adrian prepared to kick down the door.

"Go."

The Operative back kicked the door, the heel of his boot colliding with the door knob. The timber shattered with shocking force, swinging the door open. John quickly rushed in and made sure the room was clear. Scanners revealed that there weren't any traps—nothing was out of the ordinary, aside from the bloodied body that lay in the corner.

"I got our six," Arca said, moving under the door frame and taking up defensive positions.

John quickly knelt beside Shepard. She moved and squirmed, grunting in pain, they tied a piece of cloth around her eyes.

"It's okay, it's okay. Jane, it's me."

Her body slackened and uncurled. Her hands and feet were bound together by a high density rope. His heart ached as soon as he saw the myriad of cuts and bruises all over her. The skin on her legs were torn, and shrivelled from the acid tricks.

"Blaze and Viper here. We've secured the control room, and have rerouted all internal security to the north. You are clear to evac from the south."

"Copy that," John said into the mike.

"Be advised, QRF are inbound. Hunter is being engaged," Sammi broadcasted. "We're returning fire."

No one was panicking, except for John. Shepard was in worse condition than Kelly or Linda, but she was still alive, barely. He could see faint blue and green pulses run up her body as she tried to keep warm, but her skin was just so cold.

"We're going to have to carry her out," Adrian said. "I'll take point."

John nodded, and flicked on the COM channel. "Be advised, VIP-Sierra is secured. VIP-Hotel has not been found. I repeat we've secured VIP-Sierra, but no sign of VIP-Hotel."

"Copy that," Keyes said, sounding defeated. "Bring her home."

****XXxxXX****

****THE GREATER ARK, FORBIDDEN CITY****

Anna sat down in one of the campus's many gardens. She looked up at the artificial sun that hung in the sky, and looked back on the time when the Installation was illuminated by plasma shafts. The Lesser Ark or Installation 00 was holding a stationary position above. It served as the commercial capital of Coalition Space and was far more fun than the Greater Ark.

Every public holiday, Installation 00 would be by far one of the most beautiful places to be. Companies that were based on the superstructure went all out with the decorations, and coordinated efforts with one another.

Tonight marked the anniversary of the Coalition's formation, and the apparent decorative theme would be the blue spectrum. This year, the designers were aiming to merge the Lesser Ark amongst the aura of the Magellanic Clouds.

Greenfield smiled sadly as she looked back to easier days when Edmund was with her. But he was gone, and so many other people she used to know. They were all gone, dead. Carter had survived the attack, but his brown eyes and dark skin still bore the scars. He was just never the same after he had watched the people in his office go up in flames.

"Ma'am," a voice called.

Anna placed her fork on the plate and turned her attention to Carter.

"We have a situation."

Greenfield slipped back on her shoes, grabbed her tablet pc, and followed her Tom back into the office. She felt the cool air roll over her skin as she reached her level. Her entire staffs of handpicked personnel were busy at their stations, running through reports and data.

Carter led her to the central display pad, and entered in a few controls. All activity in the Command Room ceased as a live video feed began to play.

"SkySentry picked up large energy readings at these coordinates, we sent a drone to investigateâ€¦ this is what we got."

â€¦

Groups of Sovereign-class Reaper vessels glided through the abyss like fish in the ocean. Their limbs were spread open, allowing the head to fire scores of lances at the enemy. The ships were moving in a staggered wave formation, allowing them to keep their rate of fire consistent.

But it was frantic, all of it. Dozens of Reaper ships were being destroyed in a matter of seconds. Plasma and hardlight boiled and tore away at the hull, bypassing kinetic barriers entirely. There were millions of ships on both sidesâ€¦ millions. And the Reapers were losing.

Superstructures collapsed and crumbled apart under the stress, the new force was just burning through the Reaper fleet. Some of their own ships were 100 kilometres long. Their sheer size allowed them to plough through the Reaper flanks. Their shields sparked gold as stray fire was shrugged off, and Reaper ships were crushed like eggs.

Thousands of dead ships drifted into one another, and blocked the Reaper's field of fire. But the new coming force didn't have that problem, they just fired straight through. Reaper ships began their retreat, with the extra-galactic fleet giving chase.

â€¦

"Oh my god," Anna breathed. It was so quiet in the room that people could hear the hum of the computers and the low pulse of hardlight displays. The fact that the room was dark seemed to add more to the eerie effect.

Everyone had seen those ships before, the ones that had torn up the Reapers. But some of those ships were total unknowns. Their design did not match anything known to the Coalition.

"Anna, I've already relayed this to Keyes," Carter said.

She kept her eyes on the display as the onsite AI began to categorize the ships, and display them on adjacent monitors.

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_Forerunner; _Fortress_-class â€" assimilated by Flood
>Forerunner; Destroyer â€" assimilated by Flood<br>Forerunner;
Frigate â€" assimilated by Flood
>Forerunner; <em>Berthing_-class â€" assimilated by Flood

>Forerunner; <em>Keyship _â€" assimilated by Flood
>Reaper; <em>Sovereign_-class â€" assimilated by Flood
>Reaper; Destroyer-class â€" assimilated by Flood<br>Unknown;
Possible Destroyer â€" assimilated by Flood
>Unknown; Possible Carrier â€" assimilated by Flood<br>Unknown;
Possible Cruiser â€" assimilated by Flood
>Unknown; Possible Frigate â€" assimilated by Flood<br>Covenant;
_CPV_-class destroyer - assimilated by Flood
>Covenant; <em>Reverence_-class cruiser â€" assimilated by Flood

>Covenant; <em>CCS_-class battlecruiser â€" assimilated by Flood

>Covenant; Corvette â€" assimilated by Flood<br>Covenant; _CAS_-class
Assault Carrier â€" assimilated by Flood
>Covenant; <em>Flagship_-class cruiser â€" assimilated by Flood

>Covenant; <em>CSO_-class supercarrier â€" assimilated by Flood_

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The numbers that were scrolling across the screens were in the millions. The Coalition barely scrapped past 100,000. This was it, the moment in time when everything fell together in one place. The entire Flood fleet pulsed green like the inhabitants of the Milky Way. It all made sense now, the logic was so clear but so twisted.

Dark times were yet to comeâ€| and no one was ready.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE **_**â€" HOSPITAL, ROOM D4;
 BEKENSTEIN, BOLTZMANN SYSTEM, SERPENT NEBULA*

The raid was a success, no casualties and minimal collateral damage. But Halsey was gone; Parangosky and her inner circle must've bugged out and left Shepard behind. John knew that the former director always operated with a plan. It was in her nature to do so. So why did she leave Shepard behind, but take Halsey with her?

There were many theories to explain the scenario. As absurd as it sounded, John believed that Shepard no longer coincided with Parangosky's ulterior motive, and thus was left behind to contribute to the coming war. He knew Margaret wanted humanity to survive, to endure onwards. Ad she'd do it at any cost. Despite her flaws, despite her tendencies for personal vendettas, Parangosky was calculative enough to do whatever it took for humanity to survive.

John had seen enough of her handiwork to know how she thought. He'd seen too much of her handiwork in fact. Looking at Jane, his mind numbed. He had lost too many friends in his lifetime, and he considered Shepard to be one of his closest. Seeing her lie inert in the soft bed, it reminded him of a time when he was just a soldier.

A Black Ops Supersoldier, yes, but a soldier nonetheless. Now, he was more than a soldier, but at the same time he was something equally less. When he had returned to Earth, he was put through several phases of Arcani training, which would allow him to combat Insurrectionists, Fundamentalists and Rebels in newer and efficient ways. They had sharpened him into more than just a blade, they taught him how to kill someone and make it look like an accident. Hell, for a few years he had been deployed with nothing more than a laptop, tacpad and a pen to kill people.

Unbeknownst to many, Arcani Assets rarely carried weapons; there were few exceptions to the rule. But Assassins like Bishop and Arca, they were so efficient and effective that they didn't even need to fire their weapons.

Seeing Shepard, it was a dark reminder of who he was, of what he was forced to become. Parangosky had costed people so much, and yet the thought of child-soldiers stopped her from having a good night's sleep.

Osman was no different; no Spartan would show her mercy after what she had done. She had abandoned them, made them do her dirty work. She was no longer a Spartan the moment she viewed them as military hardware. She had turned her back on them; she had ordered the first hit on Halsey.

"John?" Shepard croaked.

The Spartan was pulled out his thoughts as he moved to her side.

"I'm here."

She gave a soft smile before closing her eyes again. She was tired so John allowed her to sleep while he remained vigilant.

They took her before, they can take her again.

The Doctors had done what they could. Jane would make a full recovery in a few short days. But the chemicals her captors had injected into her had changed a few things. Keyes had reassured John that the changes were superficial and wouldn't hamper her abilities. Her hair had a copper-mahogany twinge to it, but it was still predominantly hazel brown.

The doors to the room parted open, John knew who they were.

"Sir," he acknowledged.

"At ease, John."

Adrian and Riley no longer had the glow on their skin, while Blaze and Viper were never affected by the synthesis in the first place. Glowing skin could be a huge impediment to stealth operations. ONISAD would clearly want that removed, however, they still needed their skin to glow so that they could blend. Passive enhancements were made for that.

"I got you something to eat," Keyes said.

"Thanks," John smiled, taking the sandwich. He was hungrier these days. Glowing skin and neural implants tended to burn energy quickly.

"You need some sleep, Keyes," the Spartan said, noticing the General's tired posture.

Essingdon sighed, and shook his head. "I got an email from back homeâ€¦"

People began to tense up, the air was growing cold. John knew that it was bad news. He could see it in Donnie's blood drained face and tired eyes.

"The Flood is here."

****XXxxxXX****

"_AJâ€¦ isn't it?"

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

"_It's Adrian nowâ€¦ how'd you know it was me?"

>_**-Adrian James Chen â€œ "Arca"**-_

"_Reportsâ€¦ and JJ. You're his baby brother aren't you?"

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

"_Yes."

>_**-Adrian James Chen â€œ "Arca"**-_

"_Heard a lot about you when we were younger, JJ said you were always soâ€¦"

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

"_Cynical and senile for my age?"

>_**-Adrian James Chen â€œ "Arca"**-_

_[Laughs] "Yeah."

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

"_I've heard a lot about you too."

>_**-Adrian James Chen â€œ "Arca"**-_

"_Really?"

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

"_The young dashing renegade, who prefers negotiation. Kept on getting his team killed. But when he tried, miracles happened."

>_**-Adrian James Chen â€œ "Arca"**-_

"_That's sounds about right."

>_**-Admiral Thomas Lasky**_

****XXxxxXX****

****A/N:** This story is almost overâ€¦ can you feel it? I can. I guess we have another 50k odd words or so.

>Anyway, please review, and let me know what you

think.

****Thanks**
>Andrithir

54. Flood Wall

****A/N:** Apparently there's a Halo Fanon Wikiâ€| and ONISAD has an article. I am slightly suspicious, could be a coincidence though.******

****On another note, Good news! I'm on school holiday â€" I mean, er, teaching break. I'll be able to get a few chapters out over the next two weeks. But they won't be very long as I have to concentrate on my studies for the exams. Seriously, who puts exams on the first two weeks back to school? Which I might add, is after the holiday that acts as a buffer for end of term assessment fortnight. It's basically exams and assignments back to frigging back! Not cool.****

****XXxxXX****

"_Sahnâ€| do you even check shit out? Do you even... sahn?"

>_******-Lotus, to DeMarco on UNSC******_** Infinity******

"_What?"

>_******-DeMarco******_

"_Hey Palmer!"

>_******-Lotus******_

"_What?"

>_******-Palmer******_

"_DeMarco just checked out your ass!"

>_******-Lotus******_

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC ****_**NIGHT HORSE******_**, TWO DAYS LATER**********

He could see it, the fear, the panic, the chaos. Everyone was running scared; he could see it in their eyes. Feeds coming in from ARG Teams were not comforting, not in the slightest. Keyes could see the militia losing ground to the Flood, unable to fight back a superior force.

"Vigil-Three report New Denver is under Flood attack," Haverson reported. The AI's face was filled with concern and _despair_.

"Thank you. Tell Vigil-Three to deploy mines and fall back."

"Yes sir."

Keyes's shoes treaded softly across the deep navy carpet floors as he walked across the darkened control theatre. He decided to loosen his

tie a bit. He wasn't going to go anywhere soon. Analysts were running back and forth comparing data, most of them were operating on a few hours' sleep.

"Sir, Fleet Admiral Hood is on the channels."

"Patch him through."

"Yes, sir," the AI complied.

The main screen at the end of the theatre switched modes. Hood's worried face quickly replaced the projected simulations.

"General Keyes."

"Hood."

Both men greeted each other, but the formality quickly subsided and was replaced by a cold fear.

"I've been in talks with the rest of the Brassâ€¦ we're preparing for the worst," the Admiral's voice was low, tired, his energy just washed away.

Essingdon swallowed bile that had collected at the back of his throat. He took in a deep breath and turned his blue eyes to a nearby screen projecting force deployments.

"What do we have in terms of resources?" the Director asked.

"You saw what the Flood is capable. The Synthesis Event has made every self-aware being vulnerable."

Keyes knew what that meant. It was obvious for everyone to see. The Synthesis Event had turned the Flood into a hybrid parasitic race, capable of assimilating Synthetics and Organics at a terrifying rate. Essingond had played witness to the first testing which revealed the Flood's ability to interface and take over basic computers. But the Synthesis Event has allowed them to assimilate or hack Sentinels. And from that, the geth or Prometheans wouldn't be too far off either.

Everyone was scarred, especially those who knew the true reality of the parasitic form. The Flood are well and truly beyond the Feral Stage. They had arrived at the Milky Way in the Coordinated Stage.

"The Halo Array may not be as effective as we would like it to be," the Head of ONI uttered.

"No," Hood agreed. "I've requested for an immediate increase in military hardware production. But it's not going to be enough."

Keyes nodded his head lightly in agreement. Sitting down at his desk, he pulled out a paper file.

"Did you receive the documents?"

"Yesâ€¦" the Admiral breathed sharply. "History will remember as

monsters for doing this."

"There's no other way."

"I know."

"Propagation of the Flood is very concerning, sir," Keyes said pointing towards the galactic diagram. "These are the levels of Flood outbreaks and their pattern."

"It's too much to be a coincidence."

"I don't believe it's the Gravemind though. The level of organisation and the method of attack suggest that these are pre-emptive."

Hood frowned. "What are the projected casualties?"

"Magellanic Clouds will be minimal. Outer Rim is ninety-nine per cent. We don't have an accurate estimate guess on other systems."

"Keep me posted Keyes. All Coalition Fleets are mobilising to contain the situation."

"Yes sir."

"And don't hesitate to call me when you have word on Doctor Halsey."

"Of course, sir."

The link was then terminated. Donnie breathed and closed his eyes. This was it. The next few weeks could prove to be the last. He picked up his cup of coffee and downed the cold contents and smiled grimly when he remembered his mother's habits.

At least it's iced coffee, he thought. Essingdon and Catherine had never been close in that mother-son kind of way. Their relationship was more or less likened to a healthy bond between mentor and mentee. Halsey was always away from home, so Miranda filled in for the most part. But even then, Donnie was educated on Earth at a boarding school.

Good times, he reminisced. _Well it would've been better without the Covvies._

He looked up at another display screen, projecting the video feed from a Griffin Squadron deployed at the Bahuk System (Alpha Relay). The flights of Stealth Precision Attack Fighters were escorting Prowlers deploying a payload of nuclear weapons. Thanks to inertial dampeners, the UNSC's aces were able to perform manoeuvres that would've killed a Spartan.

The sleek black fighters weaved their way through fields of derelict ships and burning hull sections. Hundreds of enemy fighters were destroyed in one gun run as the Griffin's autocannons were slaved to the pilot's HUD. But despite their best efforts, Keyes knew it would never be enough.

Squadron Lead began to order his birds back into formation as the

Prowler deployed the NOVA in the debris field. The feed was terminated as the fighters performed a slipspace jump. Information from the Prowler indicated that the warhead was successfully detonated.

Keyes switched to SkySentry satellite feed. The Flood were that close. Any closer and SkyGuardian would be able to engage them. The video link showed the fiery blossom expanding relentless, consuming everything within its path. Asteroids crumbled, ships shattered, debris deformed, everything in its path was destroyed. But he knew it wouldn't be enough.

"Director, Installations twelve, seven and ten are being deployed," Haverson informed.

"God have mercy on us all," Donnie whispered.

Ever since the UNSC had expanded beyond the limits of the galactic limits, they had found vast Forerunner Installations being rebuilt. Shield Worlds, Halo Rings and the Arks, the Coalitions had plenty of room for expansion and to defend themselves. The deployment of a ring was a clear indicator how desperate times ahead would be.

Essingdon wondered if it would be enough to stop the Flood in their coordinated stage—no, they had reached intergalactic. It was unclear where the parasite had arrived from, but best estimated guessed the virulent species came from Andromeda.

He looked at the galactic display; already half of the outer rim had reported Flood presence. Fleets of Coalition Ships were already converging on the Earth to defend the Sol System. There was no military presence at Sangheilos because of its destruction at the hands of the Covenant.

Keyes sighed. There was simply too much pain and destruction in the galaxy. Being at the heart of it all made him realise the gravity of it all, a person watching this on the news could never feel what he felt. They never could see what he saw, that was the simple truth. His job demanded more than just long hours.

****XXxxxXX****

****VENEZIA RESTAURANT, SILVERSUN STRIP, CITADEL II, SERPENT NEBULA****

The new Alliance Officer Dress Blues sported more practical changes than its predecessor. In fact it followed the conventions of the UNSC Officer's Day Dress, as it had a thigh holster for a side arm, and ultra-light armoured vest.

Shepard's new Dress Blues had been tailored to her because of her size. She consistently ran her hand along the semi-flexible amour plates, a clear sign that she was suffering severe stress from the torture she received at the hands of rogue Operatives.

John had done his best to make sure she felt safe, and that her body was recovering as fast as possible. He made sure that she took her medication before eating, and that she properly stretch her muscles every hour. The stress in Keyes's voice was a clear indication of how crucial it was for Jane to get back into the fight again.

"So what are you going to have, John?" Shepard asked in her tired voice.

He gave her a soft smile. As much as he wanted to go to the front lines, he knew that he was the only person capable of protecting her. He couldn't just leave.

"I'll have what you're having," the Spartan said, remaining wary of his surroundings. He gently placed his hands on the white table cloth as his eyes ran along the water features and mahogany wall highlights. Whoever designed this restaurant would've been ex-military. Everything was in favour of those inside.

"John, are you okay?" Shepard asked, noticing that his mind was elsewhere. But he immediately became attentive when she talked to him.

"Fine," he replied, "just making sureâ€|"

"Don't worry, I'm fine."

John gave a weak smile.

"I know you feel uncomfortable about coming out here again, butâ€|"

"It's something you have to do, I know."

Jane reached out and touched John's forearm as a gesture of reassurance. "We'll be okay. Besides, Anderson and my mother wanted to have dinner with me."

John visibly relaxed as he gave a soft sigh.

"Everything's going to be fine."

The two remained in their comfortable silence as they watched other patrons mingle. The Normandy was going to be a lot quieter now with the redeployments. Palmer had returned to her original post as CO of a Spartan-IV contingent, though she seemed less than pleased. Fifth Element was deployed on a backwater colony to eliminate any potential Flood Outbreaks similar to the one First Element encountered. Rook and Wizzard were back under Palmer's command, and they had taken Bubbles with them too. Garrus was recalled back to Palaven, though initially upset, he understood the rationality. Liara, through her networks of contacts, had recently acquired a new ship as a base of her operations. Although the asari regretted leaving, she knew she would be most useful on the Umbra. And Thane had returned to the homeworld to aid planetary defences.

"Hey," Jane called, "they're here."

John looked up and saw the Admiral, First Lieutenant Kahlee Sanders and Rear Admiral Hannah Shepard, all in their new dress blues. Shepard slowly pulled herself up out of the chair. All things considered, she was recovering quickly.

"Anderson, Sanders, Mom," Jane beamed.

"Good to see you both," Anderson greeted.

"It means a lot to see you here, and safe," Hannah said, relieved.

"You too, mom."

The group settled down and ordered their meals, making small talk as they waited. No one wanted to talk about the looming threat, not here, not yet.

"Shepard," Anderson began, "I've been meaning to tell you something."

"What is it?"

"I'm planning on settling down on Earth, so I'm giving you my apartment."

Jane choked on her drink, and stared wide eyed at the Admiral.

"I don't think I can accepted, Admiral."

David smiled. "Consider it a favour to me. I want to go back to Earth, and I'd like to have no loose ends out here."

"If you put it that way, thank you."

"Glad you agree." Anderson's expression could only be described as pure joy. No more loose ends.

â€|

****SILVERSTRIP, APARTMENT****

Jane walked through the beautifully designed and decorated apartment. It had a main area that was spacious and had plenty in terms of entertainment. She smiled when she realised that the estate was designed for both quiet life and parties. Yes, she could get used to a lifestyle like that once this was all over. A few quiet nights with close friends and _Johnâ€| wait, did I just think that?_

The deep mahogany and burgundy red, mixed with dark oak wood and stunning decorations suggested a lavish yet humble lifestyle. The soft trickle of water features and ambient lighting provided a soothing feel. Yes, this apartment was designed to bring people closer together. There was even a piano in the corner.

Shepard walked over to the polished black instrument, and ran her fingers along the keys. She sat down at the seat, and played a song that her mother had taught her. She smiled at its sweet melody and soft tune. It was a nice distraction from what she had been through over the past few days.

She gazed out the window, watching the serene orange-red ember lights that streamed past the massive windows. It was comforting in that vibrant yet relaxed way.

About as good as a nebula, Jane concluded.

She turned her attention to the master bedroom, feeling that it was time to unwind for the night. She wanted to get back into the fight again, but Keyes had been very explicit with his orders. Seeing that the Alliance had become a vassal of the UNSC, it technically meant that the Head of ONI was now in her Chain of Command. But he didn't pull rank on his friends, and was happy for them to address him by his first name. _"Two days rest at least"_ she remembered him say.

"Well, one more day to go. Might as well stay in and watch a movie," Shepard muttered to herself.

Walking up the glass stairs, Jane's shoes clicked along the timber floor of the second level and then padded softly as she stepped onto the soft carpet. She quickly shed off her clothes as she entered the bathroom, and decided to soak in the warm water of her hotub.

Lowering her uncovered body into the streams, she could see the scars from her torture. Thanks to years of training and experience, Shepard was able to compartmentalise the terrible experience. She was still affected by it, but it wouldn't give her too many nightmares.

Shepard closed her eyes as she felt the powerful jets push and pulse against her sore muscles, reliving her of the aches that painkillers just never seem to get. The soft ambient music served to relax her even further. It was here she could be alone with her thoughts and reflect on her short and eventful but undeniably long career.

She was closing in on thirty-three years old chronologically. But biologically she would in her mid-twenties. Maturity wise, she was on a different spectrum entirely. The moment a person reached "hardened veteran" status, they would be considered to have enough maturity for full compatibility with other veterans.

Jane's career was one hell of a rollercoaster ride. If wisdom and experience defined age, she would definitely eclipse the Asari Matriarchs. After all, who could claim that they had gone up against one of the most exemplary Spectres, fought the Shadow Broker (and befriending the current) and defied the will of the Reapers? She had no equalâ€| except for John.

But that man, her friend, was in a different league entirely. He had resisted the will of _gods_, and helped brought a powerful alien conglomerate to its knees. Then again, he had help, she didn't.

Deciding that she had enough of the spa, Shepard pulled herself out of the steaming water and wrapped a towel around her. She walked up to mirror, coated in condensation. Wiping her hand across the surface, she found a pair of calm blue eyes and a heart shaped face with full lips looking back at her.

It appeared the operation was successful as her skin no longer pulsed green and blue. But at the press of a button â€" figuratively speaking â€" her rosy skin could have a pattern of any colour or colours rolling across her entire length once more.

Drying off quickly, Shepard walked back to the wardrobe and picked

out a simple outfit, white cotton t-shirt and shorts. She was stating in after all, the need for dressing up wasn't really necessary. Quickly tying her hair into a pony tail, she plopped herself onto the bed and flicked on the TV.

A small smile formed across her lips as she realised the TV Show was the classic British Slapstick humour called The Goodies. But before she could settle down fully, the doorbell chimed. John had returned from grocery shopping that he was so willing to do.

Turning off the set, Jane walked back down into the main area, her bare feet slapped across the timber and marble floors with a resounding thwack. It was clear that she wasn't able to power walk yet. The tendons and muscles in her legs were still healing. That was the "strength" of ONISAD interrogation and torture methods, they circumvented modern medical science, forcing the subject to heal on their own time.

"So what did you get?" Jane asked, sitting at the kitchen bench.

"Tomorrow's breakfast and dinner."

"We're going out for lunch?" Shepard arched an eyebrow.

John nodded. He was still glowing green as he placed the groceries into the fridge. He was a smart man, quick to blend with his surroundings. Jane knew the smart-casual clothing he wore would've definitely turned a few eyes. He fitted in perfectly with the vibrant populace in the streets below. But as he emptied out the bags, his skin returned to its dull self, devoid of any hues.

"You spoil me, you know that?"

He gave a light chuckle. "Don't tell Cortana."

"You should get her something," Jane laughed. "Anyways, I was watching The Goodies. Wanna join me?"

John shrugged as he retrieved some snacks and drinks, and closed the fridge.

The two settled down in the main lounge, kept warm by the eternal fire. Jane took up a comfortable position on the couch, lying across the entire length. John decided to sit down in the fully extended recliner.

Turning on the larger screen, Shepard realised that they were in a commercial break. There was also a quick news bulletin about the new turn of events of the war and a shot excerpt about the destruction of Omega. It was a reminder to the two Commanders about how badly they wanted to get back into the fight. But Keyes had been very insistent that they took a few days off, especially with Jane in her current condition.

"I met Jacob and Brynn outside the arcade," John said.

Jane smiled, happy how he could be so relaxed with her.

"What were they doing?" she asked.

"Taking a group of kids out."

"They're parents missing?"

John nodded.

"Did they say if they were going to come over?"

"Around dinner tomorrow after they've returned the kids."

Jane decided to try and forget about the war so that she could collect herself. She was aware of the dangers of focusing on conflict too much, and knew that a distraction for both her and John was absolutely necessary. They spent the rest of the night as _normal_ people staying in to watch a movie. Their part in the war would come soon enough.

â€|

****COUNCIL CHAMBERS****

Ambassador Richard Enderfield had better days than this. The galactic community was scared, all of them. First the Reapers, and now the Flood. He couldn't be bothered naming how many irrational requests he had received.

"The best I can do for you Councillor is to station a SkyGuardian and SkySentry network around the requested planets. That's the best we can do. We require all of our Fleets to stop the Flood." Richard said it with such finality that no one dared talked.

He knew they were scared, and he couldn't blame them. Hell, the Conference explaining humanity's history never took off because of Cerberus's attack. Couple this and what had recently transpired and well, it gave humanity a very _unique_ image for lack of a better term.

Enderfield had even read a Conspiracy Theorist's article. Said author was Volus for some strange reason. But there was merit the Volus's reasoning. A powerful conglomerate of species and the "remnants" of humanity appear, sweeping aside the powerful Reapers. Then just when everything was about to settle down, the Flood strikes. It was all too much of a coincidence.

"We will have a conference tomorrow in order to explain what we know so far about the Flood," Richard sighed, leaning back into his chair.

"You mean to say you do not know this enemy fully?" the Salarian Councillor gasped.

Enderfield pressed his lips together in a thin line. "It is an enemy that constantly adaptsâ€|. I'm afraid that's all I can say."

Murmurs spread throughout the hall as factions began to discuss whatever came to mind.

"How can we defend ourselves against such a force?" an Asari Diplomat asked.

Richard shifted his gaze to her. "I'll say it plainlyâ€¦ lots of nuclear weapons and difficult choices. From our military sources, the Flood is beyond Feral Stage. They are at the Extragalactic Stage. They have a hive mind controlling them now. And they have their own ships too."

"What does that mean?" a Turian Ambassador asked.

"It means that the Flood already have an organised entity commanding them."

He couldn't really bring himself to say anymore. He was a diplomat, his job was to negotiate whatever his government needed, not provide false hopes in dire straits. Everyone in the room looked to him and his colleagues for hope. But in all honesty, he had none himself.

Richard had done his research on the virulent race. All sources indicated that the only way to defeat the Flood was to have greater strength. But how can that be accomplished? Enderfield didn't have the answer; he prayed to whatever deity out there and hoped that someone in High Command did.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, SPARTAN-IV ARMOUR BAY****

Sarah walked along the catwalks, looking down upon the training Spartan-IVs. Things just seemed different now. Not better, not worse, just different. She had always thought the Spartans were the best of the best and that may be true in most cases, but most of them were not assassins. And those who considered themselves to be such, never called themselves Spartans.

Palmer had only seen a small glimpse of that dark world that lay beneath her, but already she found the outside world â€" the light to be blinding. Things no longer felt right. She could understand why they stayed. They couldn't cope with normal life, not after what they had been through.

When she had first met the first generation Arcani Operatives, she initially thought them to be just another Special Forces Branch of the UNSC. But technically, they weren't. They were Paramilitary. Although friendly and sociable, they were also impersonal to the point of cold detachment.

She also found them paranoid, and impossible to catch off guard. Their ability to merge with their social surroundings was flawless. And who would suspect a group of jokesters to be assassins? No one. It was the perfect disguise. Sarah never once found them to be unarmed. There was also a weapon of some kind within their grasp, ranging from firearms to ballpoint pens.

Having spent so much time with them, Sarah stood out against the crowd of Spartan-IVs like a sore thumb. Like before, she wore the standard black fatigues that the Spartans wore, but she also had an additional grey combat dress shirt on, and in the top pocket she had a fountain pen. Arcani was rubbing off on her already. Every hiss, every cough, everything that sounded unnatural drew her attention.

She was in a constant state of hyperawareness.

"Ma'am," DeMarco saluted.

Sarah gave him a curt nod before moving on. Everyone here was soâ€|_naÃ~ve_ about the clandestine world. Sure they would've heard about ONISAD and what not, but nothing beats seeing the real thing. She saw the real thing. Arcani were damaged men, cold and impersonal yes, but they used humour to mask their underlying guilt, grief and horror. Looking at the Spartan-IVs again, they were livelier by far.

Walking out of the bay and back to her billet, she checked to see if her sidearm and fountain pen was still on her.

I'm getting paranoid, she thought.

"Commander Palmer?" the shipboard AI inquired. Preston's avatar appeared on the overhanging projectors and _walked _along with the Spartan.

"Yes?" Sarah replied courteously.

"Command would like a world with you, in room four-c."

"Thank you, Preston."

The AI gave a curt nod and winked out of existence.

Sarah walked boarded the monorails, _brooding_ about her time with ONISAD. She couldn't help but feel genuine concern and worry for those men. They were out hunting each other, and although it literally killed them to kill their own, they had to do it. They dealt in absolutes, and thus was life for them.

Palmer hoped she would be there on the day Osman and Parangosky would be found. She had no fantasy or illusions of how their treatment was going to be. Adrian and Riley would want revenge, pure and simple. The remaining first-gen Arcani would help them undoubtedly. But she wondered how many men were "loyal" to the former Director of ONI.

Keyes had talked about redeployment to stop the Flood. But Sarah knew all too well that the rogue cells and his mother would take front seat priority.

It felt strange to leave that unforgiving world, some would be happy to leave it. Others will always be drawn back to it. Sarah had a gut feeling that she would be back in the thick of it again soon enough.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**ENDLESS**_**, EXTRAGALACTIC SPACE, BEYOND ALPHA RELAY â€" Epsilon Eridani Fleet and Cygnus Fleet****

Admiral James Cutter kept his weary eyes on the console as he brushed his fingers tips over his salt and pepper moustache. He had enjoyed many years of relative peace and quiet, but once more, war was brewing. He could feel it, sense it, and see it in the eyes of his subordinates. Many of the people on his ship had been with him on the

Spirit of Fire; they all knew the true reality of the Flood. It was nothing like the vids or the movies depicting the parasitic race. All of them had grossly underestimated the virulent specie's capabilities.

"We have multiple contacts coming out of slipspace," Selina, the shipboard AI said.

"Battle stations, have all groups move into wedge formation. Prepare the Prowlers and arm the NOVAs."

"Aye, aye."

Cutter placed both hands onto the central tactical display map. He carefully examined the Flood's attack formation. Assimilated Reaper ships made the bulk of the first wave.

Offensive Bias's odds weren't as bad as this, Cutter pondered.

He had 233 Ships under his Command, including the Prowler Task Force. The Flood Fleet numbered in the millions. A large number of those ships were heavy weight, and despite lacking in weapons, they could take a lot of punishment. They were going to be the meet shield of the Flood offensive.

"All ships, open fire," James ordered.

His fleet complied and fired everything it had. Lances of cobalt streaked the black sea and found their marks. Flood ships were gutted from stem to stern, but these ships had already been heavily damaged beforehand. The relatively pristine ships lay at the rear of their formation.

Flood ships burned as their biomass was torn from the hull with savage energy. But as they regained their bearings, the ships jumped into slipspace once more.

"Detonated warheads!"

The nuclear mines planted by the Prowler Task Force, exploded in a brilliant fiery blossom. Magnetic particles from the warheads instantly disrupted the combined slipspace jump, cleanly cutting the ships. The final blow was delivered when the slipspace rift devices were activated. In mere seconds, hundreds of vessels were destroyed by uncontained slipspace ruptures.

Cutter was using the tactics Offensive Bias had used. And like the AI, he was just bidding his time. His fingers danced across the console as he issued orders to the Strike Groups. He could've used neural lace/positronic brain implants, but he was old fashioned.

The UNSC formation expanded outwards like a blossoming flower. Interlocking fields of fire picked off any remaining stragglers. But there were those still, who could fight back.

"Forerunner _Fortress_-class vessel detected," Selina warned.

Cutter quickly brought up the COM link to the UNSC Keyships, _Timeless Victory_ and _Benedictus Machina_.

"Focus fire on that _Fortress_-class ship."

"Yes sir."

"Circumstance and Leventhorn, move in to support, I want that ship out of action."

Green acknowledgement lights winked on as the ships shifted to different vectors. Naval battles in open space were always hell. Everyone was in sight of each other, it all came down to who would get the first shot off. Cutter had employed the very same tactic Offensive Bias had. He would have his Fleet create a field of derelict ships to block the enemy Fleet, and with them effectively trapped, he would activate the mines. Nuclear mines would add more to the chaos and the resulting temporary magnetic field would stop the Flood fleet from jumping. From there, he would have his Fleet fire indiscriminately on the formation.

He just needed to draw in more of the Flood forces, and then he will order a NOVA Strike. The central display showed his naval units spreading out to accommodate the rapidly growing Flood fleet. More and more reinforcements arrived onto the field.

Timeless and _Benedictus Machina_ fired their Array, at the control room. Much to the dismay of both Admirals commanding the ship, the _Fortress_-class vessel was shielded. Thus all the weapons did was just _melt_ away the biomass that coated the hull.

Cutter's combined strike on the ship, proved to be fruitful as thousands of rounds impacted at a concentrated position, giving _Endless_ an ace in the hole. The _Omnipotence_-class ship's main guns warmed up and fired, gutting the Forerunner from stem to stern. With its reactor core ruptured, the entire ship shattered in a brilliant blue explosion, consuming the smaller ships around it.

Now it was the UNSC's turn to take casualties. Frigates attempting to outflank a Flood group, were mercilessly pinned down by a Covenant Supercarrier and Forerunner Destroyers. The Four _Wales_-class Frigates managed to punch through the Supercarrier's hull in mere seconds. Ion/Hardlight rounds and Plasma Torpedoes overloaded the shields and boiled the hull away. Thousands of Flood Warriors were sucked out into the endless void. The Supercarrier shuddered and split into ragged halves as Fusion Warheads detonated deep within its hull. It was like a flaming fire cracker going off, spewing golden flecks into space.

But though the Supercarrier gave way, the Assimilated Forerunner Destroyers swooped in for the kill. Their main guns glowed ember as they overloaded the golden shields. With the energy barriers gone, the _Wales_-class Frigates were helpless against the merciless onslaught of boarding craft.

"This is _Osgilon_, we are being boarded," a female Commander cried.

"_Unto Lenth_, we've got Flood forces breaching the bridge!" a male Commander roared.

Cutter could hear frantic gunfire over the channels. He swore silently as he realised there was nothing he could do for the trapped

frigates.

"Chi Rho, see if you can help them out. New Hampton, tighten up formation and cover them."

"Copy sir," the Officers replied.

Carrier Strike Group Chi Rho shifted left, with their guns still blazing. Broadswords and Claymores were deployed from the Carriers and Cruisers. Countless smaller explosions dotted the abyss as fighters and interceptors engaged one another in a savage sortie.

Hampton-class Destroyers attacked the Forerunner Destroyers in a wedge formation, while _Yorkshire_-class Frigates moved in to defend their lighter brethren. The Forerunner ships waned under brutal concentrated fire from the UNSC Destroyers. Their shields winked out of existence, leaving their white hull at the mercy of the cobalt salvo. The ships shook violently under the impact, their hull was boiled away, while the biomass within burned.

"_Osgilon_ here, situation under control," the Commander sighed in relief.

"Move to Chi Rho for quarantine," Admiral Toria ordered. She was in command of Ectanus Fleet.

"Copy that."

Lenth however was not so lucky. The entire crew was assimilated in the span of a few minutes, and with the AI on the brink of being converted. _He_ flew the ship straight into the Flood formation, and rammed an unidentified Cruiser at full speed. The Frigate went out with a powerful yet silent bang, with all nuclear warheads detonating in a spectacular fashion. Scores of Flood ships were caught in the ensuing blast, rendering them derelict.

"Multiple reports of enemy ships colliding with derelict vessels and mines," Selina informed.

"Tell the Griffin's it's time to strike."

"Yes sir."

The entire Flood Armada had arrived onto the Field. Cutter had done his part, now it was to deliver the savage blow and bust out. Lone Griffin birds left the hold of a Stealth Cruiser, and soared towards their destination.

The pilots weaved through the field of destroyed vessels and avoided the spewing flames of ignited atmosphere. They flew through the clouds of molten metal, and upon reaching their objective, they released their payloads. Bombs detonated, clearing out an open wide enough for the Prowlers.

As the stealth ships dropped back into normal space, they released the NOVAS, and then retreated. When everyone was confirmed to be clear, the warheads detonated and unleashed their savage energy. The firestorms erupted and spread with an insatiable hunger, tearing through everything that lay in its path.

And just like that, everything was quiet once more.

****XXxxXX****

"_How does the Flood communicate?"

>_**- (Formerly) Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:****

****Next chapter we'll be focusing on Palaven, and the Coalition Task Force that is stationed there. Arbiter will be a more prominent character.****

****I've been receiving a lot of PMs about pairingsâ€¦ I would like to have opinion of readers, can be anything, broad or specific, so long as matter is address. Hmm, yes, will be here testing seashells and wait for reviews.****

****Wondering if I should do a rewrite of the first chapter. Anyway, please leave a review â€" the more the merrier.****

55. Unjustified Revelations

****A/N: Let's rapid fire a bit, now shall we?****

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"_Semi-Controlled Fragmentation Incendiary Catalystâ€¦ or Scofic for short hand, these are made for bringing down big soft targets like Flood or Brutes, consider it a Raufoss for soft targets. It has a hollow point head, and a tungsten dart backed up by thermite-Catalyst compound. If upon impact on body armour, the round will fragment outside the target, while the tungsten dart will penetrate and lead the incendiary into the tissue. On unarmoured targets, the round will fragment inside the target, causing massive tissue damage. Tungsten dart will create more internal damage while incendiary/catalyst burns up the flesh."

>_**-Alec "Saps" Herschon**_

"_Uhâ€¦ what?"

>_**-Lotus**_

"_In short, expect fireball and cooked meat."

>_**-Saps**_

****XXxxXX****

****PALAVEN****

Sammi had a preference for the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected Quick-Reaction Utility Vehicle-14 (MRAPQRUV-14) "Bullhound" as opposed to the Warthog. Of course, she'd never tell her team that

unless she wanted to find her beloved vehicle covered in god knows what. Most of the people in her outfit were Warthog fanatics. Granted the Hog was a beautiful piece of engineering, but they were just so vulnerable to attacks. Having being deployed to a Yellow Zone inside an M14 Warthog, Salas knew firsthand how vulnerable those vehicles were against rockets and IEDs.

Sure the addition of a wider frame, armour plating and doors were a huge bonus for the M14, but it still wasn't going to last long if it got pinned down. The Bullhound was a game changer for convoys. Just a little under the size of four combined Warthogs, the Bullhound was a multi-role vehicle that was tremendously sturdy and powerful. Active and passive defensive measures combined with the V-shaped hull allowed the utility vehicle to resist even the heaviest ordinance IEDs.

Despite it not being as nearly as agile as the Warthog, the Bullhound was still undeniably fast on the most difficult of terrains. In Sammi's opinion, speed wasn't going to matter that much if the vehicle was going to be taken out by one hit. It was like driving to death faster.

The Allied Convoy was en route to the turian capital, Cipritine. The vast majority of the convoy was composed of UNSC and Sangheili armoured vehicles. Bullhounds formed the central formation, with each vehicle kitted out for a specific purpose. The entire convoy was part of a larger battle group with the best ground vehicles and close-air support aircraft the Coalition, Krogans and Turians had to offer.

"This is Four-One Actual we are engaging enemy armoured forces at this time," a tank platoon commander broadcasted.

"Copy that Four-One," Command replied. "All Battlegroup Elements are to approach Cipritine and hold position at the mountain side roads, how copy?"

Sammi sent an acknowledgement message via the radio installed inside the Bullhound. She switched channels to contact her CO, Colonel Dave Fieldings.

"Sir, what's the situation upstairs?" Huntress asked.

There was a slight pause on the other end. "Situation is holding steady, the Sangheili Fleet is holding back Flood naval forces, and says they can do so indefinitely."

"That's good to hear," Sammi sighed in relief.

Looking out the windows, she could see the noon sun shining over barren plains and the mountain range ahead. The Allied convoy sped towards Cipritine with Recon and Air Elements clearing the way for the main assault.

UNSC Firehawks and Sangheili Banshees swooped dangerous close to the ground to unleash their payloads. The land beneath them were set ablaze in their wake, and cooled down to glass.

"Ma'am?" Private James Dublin called, keeping both hands firmly on the wheel.

"Yes?"

"Why don't we just glass or nuke the place?"

Sammi could see his frown and furrowed brow through the unpolarised visor.

"That's a big negative Dublin, there are still pockets of resistance inside the city" and we still want a city to be left standing once we're done."

There was another reason to why the Coalition Fleet couldn't bombard the planet. It was not really a secret, but the Sangheili and UNSC High Command would rather keep it quiet for now. Mass effect Fields were excellent dampeners against neurological radiation frequencies, which was what the Halo rings relied on to be devastating. If a mass effect field was strong enough, it could theoretically protect those inside from the Halo Array.

Upon reaching the mountain range, the convoy began scaling the slopes to reach the summit. Radio chatter picked up as the main battlegroup linked up with advanced sniper teams and recon units. The Bullhound's engines roared as it pushed the vehicle onto the plateau ridgeline. Sammi could see the Air Traffic Controllers attached to the forward elements calling in airstrikes ranging from Firehawk gun runs to heavy ordinance drops by Short Swords. Versatile Broad Swords flew at low altitude to provide rapid response security, while Claymores flew at higher altitudes to secure air supremacy. It was clear the UNSC was providing the most resources in this battle.

"All units, halt, halt!" the order came in.

Sammi's Bullhound pulled to a stop on the summit and allowed the passengers to disembark. Her company of ODSs deployed from a handful of vehicles took up firing positions along the ridgeline, taking cover behind some rocks.

Already they had begun to open fire with Sabres and Scars. It seemed that the two weapon families had found equilibrium in the armed forces. SCAR-L was favoured as the standard issue because of its accuracy, rate of fire and magazine size. SABR-H was the choice for team leads and overwatchers.

Salas noticed that there were some men who preferred to remain on the Mammoths and Elephants to shoot. However, no one decided to stay in the Badger APC variant, even though it was capable of having its passengers shoot from within it.

Artillery units remained at the rear of the line, and began to lob shells into the city. Sammi could see the ghostly blue trails from the Wraiths' plasma rounds, streaking through the sky and crash into some distant building with devastating power. The UNSC Javelins were by far the loudest as they fired round after round, varying from high explosive to cluster shells.

Tanks had taken up firing positions further down the slopes facing Cipritine. Their main cannons boomed through the entire range as they let loose devastating salvos into the city far away. Keyes's tactics against the Flood had been very clear; pummel the parasite at long

distances before moving in for clean-up.

"Look at that," Dubbo muttered as he walked up to the Captain. He pointed towards the sickly city shrouded in thick black smoke and a green mist.

Sammi magnified her optics and could see the diseased flesh clamber onto the buildings and flood the streets with tree root like tentacles. The fear factor only seemed to be increased by the green patterns that pulsed and glowed along the sickly skin.

"Do you think there are any survivors left?" the Sergeant asked.

Huntress shrugged. "I really don't know."

Fire from the fireteams had slackened considerably as the tanks and mounted guns began to take the load off. From her vantage point, Sammi could see thousands if not millions of Flood forms stream out of the city with the intent to infect the task force. Dozens of them went up in flames at a time, completely boiled away by sheer heat or ripped into ribbons by the powerful shockwaves. Anything that managed to break through the ring of fire was instantly picked off by the snipers.

So far, there were no reported casualties, or anyone being overwhelmed. Bombers came in low and fast to deliver napalm to contain the Flood. The entire battle was like one beautifully choreographed light show with everyone taking it easy. Sammi was proud to say that for the first time in combat, she didn't have her adrenaline pumping for all the right reasons.

However, she could only imagine the hell the survivors were going through right now. Not only would they have to fight their way through the horde of parasites, but they would have to try and avoid the overwhelming bombardment.

Soldiers still lay low just in case a stray shot hit them, but the UNSC's weapons have range far greater than what the turians have. The Flood weren't going to be able to get in close enough without being fried by air assets.

Sammi returned to her truck and grabbed the M770 SASR. She positioned herself on the rooftop of her Bullhound. Looking down the scope, she could see the snipers at work picking off anything that popped up in the windows. Scores of assimilated Reaper units, turians and krograns dropped like flies as hypervelocity rounds punched through their bodies. She could see the puff of green at the entrance and exit wounds as the forms fell.

Near the city limits, Shortswords dropped an unprecedented amount of thermobaric warheads. In less than a second, a wide area would cover in a dark cloud and then go up in a huge fireball. Further into the city however, Sammi watched the UNSC Air Force drop caustic gas which burned away at exposed flesh. It was like watching vines shrivel on the building side. Tons of biomass just melted and withered, relinquishing their hold on the buildings.

Though Flood had adopted the turian natural biological defence, which was growing a metallic carapace around their flesh to shield them

from solar radiation, it did little to protect them from the caustic vapour. The Parasite still needed to breathe; thus the gas burned them from the inside out. The ones with the longest exposure were turned to mush inside a shell.

"All units cease bombardment. Forward battle group elements are to move into Cipritine and clear out the Flood," Command ordered.

Sammi got down from her Bullhound and ordered everyone in her company to mount up. Getting back into the passenger seat, she ordered Dublin to drive. Mechanised Infantry took the lead, roaring into battle inside the Badgers.

â€|

****ADVANCE ON CIPRITINE****

Garrus Vakarian was glad to be back on Palaven, but it wasn't the type of fight he was hoping for. The enemy he was going up against, required tactics that the UNSC liked to call "blitzkrieg". It was in effect surgical and powerful air strikes followed up by armour and artillery.

If there was one thing the Turian could say about UNSC Combat Doctrine, it was that they liked the best of all worlds. They didn't have a fixed convention per say, instead it was a combination of precision, shock and awe, and stealth which allowed them to win the day.

Like many of the other turians and krogans, Garrus was regulated to liaison duty. They did not have enough experience in fighting the Flood, thus they got to observe the UNSC's Containment Protocols first hand.

The streets of Cipritine were far too narrow for the heavy vehicles, so they remained at the city limits to provide fire support. UNSC Armoured Convoys took the lead, and allowed their troops to disembark to support.

Garrus stepped off the Mako and joined the ODST Captain, Huntress in the residential area. She was coordinating fire teams to help clear out buildings whilst providing cover should an enemy sniper appear. Cradling his sniper rifle, Garrus panned his eyes across the war torn streets. Despite the Coalition's fire missions, there was still countless fort like structures which housed the parasite.

"Situation?" Vakarian asked the Helljumper.

"We've got two house with Flood still inside," she answered, gesturing to the martial houses on the side of the road.

ODSTs opened fire into the building, allowing Garrus to see the cobalt embers that drifted into the air before cooling down into blackened ash.

Overhead, Airborne Chalks flew into battle. They touched down on the rooftops and systematically cleared out the houses with drones and Sentinels. Any houses that were deemed too heavily infested were marked for armour to deal with.

Badges outfitted with microwave weaponry (Beam Badgers "BB") rolled up outside the houses and literally cooked the enemy inside while keeping collateral damage to a minimal. But the microwave guns required a lot of cooling as Garrus could feel the heat from its coils.

The process in clearing out Cipritine was painfully slow as the Armed Forces would neutralise any combat forms, before allowing BBs to come in and cook the remaining biomass. Drones and Sentinels helped speed up the process. UCADs outfitted with plasma shields would run ahead of the advancing force and clear a path.

Looking down at the road, Garrus could see its glassy black surface. Keyes had talked about the Flood with Liara and the Turian in his spare time. The scientist had detailed every possible strategy to efficiently contain the parasite while minimising collateral damage.

The tactics being employed here were made to clear out the infection while not taking the city down with it. For that, Garrus was thankful to Keyes.

Pushing deeper into the city, the Coalition reached a deep ravine which was filled with Flood Biomass. Looking down into the entrenchment, Garrus gaged as he smelt the decay and realised that it was the thousands of turian and krogan bodies that filled it. The tough carapace that protected it from the caustic gases would do little against the microwaves.

BBs pulled up alongside the ravine and pointed their disks downwards. Energy coils whined and heated as insurmountable energy was aimed at the ravine. Garrus could only imagine the flesh beneath boiling and bubbling under the intense heat. The carapace would not hold for long.

People began to lob incendiary grenades into the pit to weaken the metallic shell. A few minutes later, the tough surface cracked and burst. A torrent of mushy liquid bubbled through and amplified the horrid stench.

Even turians gagged and barfed.

Like his men, Garrus had to lift his helmet to allow him to dump his lunch onto the ground.

"You get used to it," Captain Salas said with a shrug.

"Spirits that is awful," Vakarian choked.

UNSC Engineers soon arrived to the frontlines. Their Bullhounds had been configured like fire trucks except they wouldn't be firing any fire retardants. The engineers threw houses linked from the trucks, over into the ravine. There they dumped gallons of caustic liquid onto the Flood biomass.

Garrus watched in fascination as the liquid funnelled into the openings of the shell and broke down the tissue. Satisfied that this threat was over, the group moved on.

In the lead were three Titan Walkers and a Sangheili Scarab. Their high elevation gave them an unprecedented angle for their overwhelming firepower. Vakarian could only smile as he heard the thunderous howl of their main guns unleashing a torrent of fire upon the Flood. But the easy part was over. Now the task force was required to clear out the industrial zone. This was going to be hell.

â€|

****ABOARD **_**EXULTANT SUPREMACY**_**, HIGH ORBIT** â€" Fleet of Enduring Resolution******

The second wave of Flood ships had arrived, and with them they had the infected Reapers. Thel ordered his ships to form a defensive wedge as they moved to engage the approaching armada.

"Arbiter, the enemy fleet outnumber us four to one," R'tas said in their native language.

"Move second group to flank, I want all Cruisers to open fire the moment those ships are in range. Have fighters ready to deploy. Nothing are to board our ships."

"As you Command."

Over Palaven, the Coalition Naval Task Force moved to flank. Stealth ships had deployed mines and waited to detonate them for maximum effect. The first wave of Flood ships lay in ruins, creating a field of derelict wreckage. But the approach of the second wave signified that something was wrong.

Vadam could see the capital ships move to the front of the formation, and plough through the field of debris. Mines detonated to stop the suicidal ships, causing the blue shields to wink out.

"Open fire!" Thel ordered.

Plasma collected at the tip of the turrets as pulse lasers darted through the abyss and reached out to their target. Salvos of Sangheili fire reached the Flood Armada and burned through their hull. Flowery blossoms of fire and molten metal flew out into space as the lead ships lost power and careened aimlessly. Unable to withstand the tremendous stress from opposing fire, the first Flood cruisers broke in half. The assimilated crew on board were at the mercy of the endless vacuum.

The UNSC's SkyGuardian network went into action. The Orbital Platforms created a staggered line of energy shields to prevent any stray shots from hitting the planet. At the same time, they opened fire with devastating effect on the armada. AI coordinated fire allowed the Coalition Fleet to move freely without fear of being shot and at the same time receive desperately needed fire support.

Cobalt lance slashed enemy ships from stem to stern, gutting them in savage strikes. But the second wave showed no sign of slowing down, they continued on to plough through and charge the Coalition formation.

Griffin fighters carrying nuclear warheads performed dangerous

slipspace jumps to drop the weapons behind the enemy, before retreating to rearm. The warheads detonated in a perfect spherical fashion as they consumed countless smaller ships. The larger vessels shuddered from the shockwave and rolled. The delay brought the defenders valuable time as they geared up for another powerful salvo.

But regardless of the heavy casualties, the second wave pushed through the fire as they aimed to ram the lead cruisers in the formation.

Vadam issued the order for all ships to fan out and draw the Flood away from Palaven. In doing so, they strung out the Flood formation and exposed them to the SkyGuardian Network.

Sangheili and UNSC Destroyers lead the charge against the second wave. Their wedge formation and rapid firing weapons allowed them to punch through the parasitic formation. Forks of blue and violet tore through space as ships opened fire on one another. Smaller Flood ships broke off and engaged their Coalition counterparts in a savage battle.

Still, the heavy ships remained on course and accepted their punishment. They were so badly beaten to the point they could no longer return fire. Some were even picked off by the second field of mines. The battered and bruised hulls could no longer sustain such damage that they billowed outwards as the core ruptured and exploded. Nearby ships caught in the blast were heavily damaged themselves.

It was absolute pandemonium. But the ships that were still intact pushed the wounded up as meat-shields. Vadam feared for the worst as the second wave showed no sign of halting.

Plumes of white smoke from the UNSC missiles indicated that the Admiral Charlie Wong planned to create another field of derelict ships as a shield. Shockwaves from the blast hurled the defunct ships back at the Flood. Hulls crashed against one another with the weaker giving way. Scores of light-capital ships were taken out by the move.

"Arbiter, prepare the Array," Wong said over the channel.

"At once," Thel replied.

UNSC Keyship Enduring Prosperity and the Exultant Supremacy "elevated" their position on the battlefield. Their nose pointed towards the centre of the Flood formation, composed purely out of assimilated Forerunner ships.

The Capacitors charged up and powers diverted to the devastating weapons. Both ships fired and panned. A blinding blue light washed across the entire battlefield. Hundreds of Flood ships once filled with life was instantly rendered dead. They continued on their current course aimlessly, ramming into their own ships. Dozens of explosions ripped across the age old Flood fleet, rendering so many out of commission.

Though the Array was a devastating weapon, it also left the ships at a severe disadvantage. With the capacitors having overheated, Enduring Prosperity and Exultant Supremacy could not fire their

main weapons.

But for now, Vadam was content to let the rest of the Fleet handle it. Some of the Cruisers opened fire with their Array, but not at full power. They easily rendered the light-capital ships lifeless, but the bigger ships remained unaffected. Only the Flood biomass on the hull was stripped away, everything else within were unscathed.

SkyGuardian Platforms disengaged from orbit and moved in for clean-up work to neutralise the second wave.

Vadam pulled up the tactical map and saw the rest of the Flood Armada retreating back into slipspace. This was concerning as he knew the parasite would later return in greater force, if not, they were going to reinforce another front and overwhelm the defenders.

Immediately, he pulled up his reserves and had them on standby. The main battle elements weren't going to be relieved any time soonâ€| but at least they weren't asking for rest.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE, **_**NEAR THE SERPENT NEBULA â€**
Group 7**

Keyes sat at his desk with tired eyes. He hadn't slept in a very long time and coffee could only keep him going for so long.

"When was the last time you slept?" Fhajad sighed as he walked in.

"Last week?" he shrugged, rubbing his eyes and holding back a yawn.

"Why don't you take a break," the Spartan-II suggested. "I can handle things from here. If there's anything, I'll call you."

"Alright," Essingdon agreed with a strained sigh. He pulled himself up from the chair and left for the observation deck to clear his mind.

He navigated through the endless corridors and security checkpoints before finally reaching the quiet room. He walked into the deep blue lounge with soft ambient music and set himself down in a recliner. Folding both arms across his chest, he drifted off into a dreamless sleep. He probably got a half hour of rest before his tacpad chimed.

Blinking away drowsiness, Keyes activated his COM and heard Fhajad's relieved voice.

"Biometrics has picked up your mother's tag."

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****SHEPARD'S APARTMENT, SILVERSUN STRIP, CITADEL II****

Jane awoke to the soft sunlight shining through the windows, and the

smell of bacon coming from the kitchen. She always had liked bacon, preferring the decadent delight over a healthy salad any day.

Who says bacon isn't healthy? She joked to herself.

She rolled her head across the pillow and under the blanket before sitting up from the couch. She realised she had fallen asleep in the lounge but never recalled bringing a blanket or pillow with her. Jane guessed her Spartan friend tucked her in.

Out of sheer habit, Shepard folded up the blanket neatly on the couch before padding into the kitchen.

"Morning," John smiled as he flipped the pancakes.

Shepard yawned and stretched, before tucking strands of her brown hair behind her ear. She needed a haircut.

"Morning, how long was I asleep for?"

"Nine hours," John replied.

Jane was slightly shocked; she hadn't slept that long in a while. But it seemed to do her justice as her muscles were no longer in pain. Though she didn't have full range of motion yet, tissue damage had been extensive. It might take her another few days to fully recover.

Walking over to the fridge, Shepard grabbed a bottle of orange juice and placed it on the counter. She then got two glasses from the upper cabinets and then poured the drinks. Meanwhile, John prepared her a plate of pancakes with maple syrup and ice cream and bacon. Once he was done, he placed it down on the counter for her to eat, while he prepared his own.

The two sat down by the table near the window and looked out over the skyline of the Silversun strip. It was nice, relaxing and _normal_. Jane felt she and John could do with a bit of normal in their lives.

Tucking into the pancakes, Shepard gave a soft smile as she realised this was better than her mother's — not that she'd ever tell that to Hannah. It was slight crispy golden brown and was complimented perfectly by the maple syrup and ice cream.

The bacon, now that was euphoric. The edges were crispy while the centre was soft, it was absolutely _decadent_. It was how Jane loved her bacon. She wondered how John knew though — she probably might have spilt something when she had a gallon of alcohol pumping through her body after the Collector mission.

Although the comfortable silence between them was nice, Jane was itching to know what was going on with the War, so she used her Omni-tool to turn on the news. A lot of it had been censored so the masses wouldn't panic. The reporters talked about ongoing war efforts against the Flood. Oddly enough, there was no mention of the Reapers.

Controversy sells, she sighed.

"_Cerberus Conspiracy, we have Emily Wong with more on the story,"
_the Asari Anchorwoman announced, _"Emily."_

The feed switched to the reporter standing outside the temporary UNSC Embassy.

"_Thank you Nyla,"_ the Human Reporter began. _"Just less than an hour ago, Cerberus was revealed to have been a Black Operation by the United Nations Space Command."_

John choked on his bacon, but managed to swallow the offending bite. He used a napkin to wipe his mouth as he spun round in his chair. Jane spat out her juicie and neglected to wipe her mouth as her eyes bulged at the story on screen.

"This is not happening," she whispered.

"_The Organisation is enigmatic at best, but we have confirmed sources that say the United Earth Government was not aware of the UNSC's involvement with the human supremacist organisation. Head of ONI General Essingdon Dominic Keyes, who holds a doctorate in the sciences and a masters in psychology, claims that he and many other high ranking officials were unaware of Cerberus until recent raids carried out by ONI Operatives."_

Emily Wong continued on to talk about the intricate affairs surrounding Cerberus and the UNSC. Finally, she dropped the bombshell; Arcani.

"_Office of Naval Intelligence Special Activities Division, is the dagger in the dark of ONI. It is believed that Cerberus was conceived by the men and women of this division. But even then, the project was a secret, and many other ONISAD personnel were unaware of Cerberus until recently. Admiral Serin Osman, the source behind the exposure is reported to be missing."_

John dropped his fork, letting it clatter on the china plate. He could only shake his head in shock as ONI's deepest and darkest secrets were broadcasted to the entire galaxy.

"_The Arcani Program consists of adult volunteers who have been deemed suitable for candidacy. They are some of the best and brightest humanity has to offer, and what they endure is abhorrent to most. The Program turns these men into efficient assassins, trained to 'protect the interests of Earth and her colonies'," _Emily quoted mockingly. _"Several news networks based at the Coalition's capital have expressed similar outrage."_

Shepard could only imagine what kind of torment the Arcani Operatives would go through after this. She watched the news show footage of Arcani recruits executing captured criminals and Insurrectionists in cold blood.

"_Admiral Osman's report says that a select team of Arcani Operatives were the ones who helped initiate Cerberus."_

Instinctively, Jane reached out for John's hand to comfort him. It was like watching his entire life's work and purpose be reduced to nothing. It was like watching the lives of Adrian, Riley, Gabriel and countless others, be reduced to nothing. Shepard knew she was

witnessing the first step towards anarchy.

"_Once again, General Keyes denies involvement and knowledge of Cerberus's existence until the Coalition's return."_

Shepard watched John visibly sag into his chair, and realise the full gravity of this exposure.

"_Admiral Osman also reveals the sinister beginnings of the UNSC's Supersoldier Program."_

"Oh my god," Shepard breathed as she remained rooted to her seat.

Everything just went downhill from there. John had never outright admitted that he was a child soldier, because he never considered himself to be one. He was fully trained and highly skilled by the time he was deployed. But this news bulletin, painted him and his brothers and sisters as broken children forced to fight. Conveniently, they failed to say that Osman was a washed out Spartan-II, or the fact that the candidates weren't mindless.

"_The UNSC's hero, formerly Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John-One-Seventeen, now Commander-One-Seventeen, is a Spartan-II. The Program was conceived by Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey, whom is Keyes's motherâ€¦|"_

Jane turned off the TV as she saw how visibly shaken John was. His glazed eyes and sagged shoulders showed his shock and resignation.

"John?" she whispered softly.

"I-I'm fine."

He just stammered!

Slowly, John rose from his seat and reached to collect the plates, but before he could do so, Shepard pulled him into a strong embrace. She rested her chin on his shoulders as he drooped in horror. Wrapping his arms around her, Jane could sense his absolute despair at the injustice done to him. His entire life was depicted like a sappy tragedy on the news, with a great disregard to the Spartans' memory. It failed to note the candidate's acceptance of their role. It failed to mention the necessity of the Program!

Of course many in the UNSC knew how vital the Program was, so no real damage done there. But the propaganda the Insurrectionist could extract from this was huge. All of ONISAD's sacrifice was all in vain now. Everyone would see them as the evil people behind the scenes on some secret base, no one would see them as the day to day people forced to accomplish the most difficult of things and make the toughest decisions.

This news report robbed them of everything.

"I'm so sorry," Shepard whispered while rubbing his back. "I'm so sorry."

The doorbell chimed, separating the two. Shepard went to open the

door, and found Cortana and Fhadjad waiting outside.

"Is he here?" the AI asked with a sorrowful tone.

Jane nodded, "come on in."

Closing the door, she led the casual clothed people into the main area. John leaned forward against the windows with a hand on the glass pane.

"John," Fhadjad greeted.

He turned and gave a sad smile. "Everythingâ€| has been undone."

"We can only hope now," Fhadjad console. "Keyes sent me here to collect you. He's been working overtime to minimise collateral."

"And we've found Halsey," Cortana added. "She's on Thezar in the Terminus Systems."

John's gaze fell to the floor. "They even showed a picture of her."

"That's why we got to go," Fhadjad urged. "Fifth Element is already moving in to extract her, but they'll need support and Keyes doesn't trust anyone else on this. Halsey is a HVT for the Innies, if they get to herâ€| well, Godspeed."

****XXxxXX****

"_The UNSC's image has been stained by rebel groups and dissatisfied colonists. The cause of this are attributed to a large number of factors, but the most prominent cause is rapid expansion that we cannot tame. Instead of trying to control every colony or outsource administration to corporations, managing resources for the colonists would be far easier. Granted civilian administration falls to the UEG and CAA, but there is no doubt the UNSC plays a large role in all of this. But humanity is not comfortable with the military leading human expansion. Why? Because after the 21__st__ Century, expeditions were handled by civilian organisations not military, and though the UNSC employs a large number of civilians, it is still ultimately seen as a military conglomerate. During the Human-Covenant War, emergency powers acted as a boon for anti-UNSC propaganda._

Past actions such as returning power to the CAA and UEG has allowed the UNSC's image to recover. Handing ONI administration over to civilian control was also a good move as it bridged the gap between civilian and military. But the UNSC's image still walks on a knife's edge. A leak of information is all it takes for the Secessionists and Insurrectionists to unite with warlords and crime syndicates against the UNSC.

_Projections indicate the URF will launch pre-emptive strikes across the yellow zones to obtain as much resources as possible. PMCs will be the worst hit in the initial attacks. The only possible course of action for the UEG/CAA is to __**order**__ the UNSC to commence a large military campaign to pacify the rebels."

>_**-Extract from (formerly) LTCOL Doctor Essingdon Dominic Keyes**_

****XXxxxXX****

****A/N:** I've been wonderingâ€¦| does anyone actually like Palmer? I mean canon Palmer, not LL's Palmer.******

****Anyway, please review and tell me what you think.****

56. A Way Out

****XXxxxXX****

"_This isn't my first rodeo."

>_******-Commander Sarah Palmer, to (formerly) Captain Thomas Lasky, prior to carrying out the failed assassination of Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey******_

****XXxxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC**_** DIVINUS**_**, IN SLIPSPACE, ENRTOUE TO THEZAR****

It was the night shift, and Miranda had retired to her quarters for the day. The banana smoothie she held in her hand was tasteless, but the chef had made it the way she liked it. No, it wasn't the drink, it was her.

After what she had seen on the news, she was so worried for her brother. So much had been undone by the actions of a few. All of ONI's life work and sacrifice to safeguard humanity from itself had gone down the drain. The Insurrectionist now had even more for their propaganda to go on with. Their ranks will no doubt swell by the thousands by weeks end.

Whatever sick game was happening behind the scenes, she knew her brothers and his closest friends will be in the heart of it. She had learnt a long time ago that the innocent boys had died during training, and all that was left were impersonal men. Miranda had seen it in her brother's eyes in 2550.

_The Human-Covenant War still feels like yesterday, _she said to herself.

The final years of the war would've been a personal hell for Donnie as he had to receive the letters notifying him about the death of his family. Miranda had faith in her brother's steadfast and calm personality, but she knew they could only go so far.

As she was about to settle down for the night, her communicational terminal chimed. She swung her bare legs out of the bed and walked to her desk. Pressing a key, the main screen sparked to life and revealed a tired looking Essingdon. His unshaven face, baggy eyes, and attire loosened for more comfort, stood out in contrast to Miranda's supple skin and sleep wear.

"Donnie," she smiled calmly as she sat down. Even though he outranked her, he still looked up to her.

"Miriâ€¦|" he was lost for words, tired and on the verge of breaking.

He was still in his office on the _Night Horse_, receiving report after report.

"What's wrong?"

"I want you to promise me something," he said in a low voice.

"Sure."

"Can you do whatever it takes to get mum back?"

Miranda nodded. She knew exactly what she was getting into. Intel showed that Halsey was out in some backwards colony where Mercenaries and Criminals run rampant. Neither the Flood nor the Reapers had touched them yet, so they were still in their own little world.

Essingdon had tasked her with taking Fifth Element and a contingent of Spartan-IVs to launch a rescue mission. Obviously the rescue team would be conducted by the ONISAD Team, while the Spartain-IVs provided security.

"Thanks, that's all I needed to know. Take care."

"I will, you know that."

Her brother gave a grim laugh. "Delta Halo? Ark?"

Miranda shrugged.

"I can't lose you again," he said sincerely. "If it comes down to it and you can't get mum out. Save yourself, okay?"

Miranda nodded slowly, as much as it would hurt her to abandon her mother, if it came to it she would have to. Better to lose one than lose both.

"Something else is bothering you Donnie, what is it?"

Essingdon sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Opening the drained blue, he looked back at his sister and shook his head with sadness and defeat.

"Low blow. They've released personal information about first generation Arcani Operatives."

"Oh my god," Miranda whispered.

"I've talked to Adrian about it. They're all upset, Miri. Parangosky has taken what's left of their lives. Most of them have nothing outside of ONI now."

Leaning back into her chair, she rubbed her forehead. She knew that this wasn't really her problem, but her brother was trying to fix it. He sounded so lost and overwhelmed.

"What did he say?" Miranda asked, trying to get Essingdon to open up a little.

"He sounded defeated. He said that this exposure will make him an outcast of his family."

"He's overreacting," the Commander stated firmly.

Essingdon shook his head in disagreement. "You don't know what Parangosky and Osman forced them to doâ€| they've released classified documents about sensitive operations to the public."

"Is there no way to stop this?" Miranda asked desperately.

"No," he said softly. "Everything is beyond contingency now."

â€|

****DECK-4****

Sarah walked through the quiet halls, spending some time alone with her thoughts. The Arcani and Cerberus Exposure had dominated the news cycles. Every news network focused on the scandal, rather than focusing on the Reapers or the Flood.

Controversy sells, right? She thought.

Cerberus had been the dominating terrorist organisation in the galaxy; it was shocking to discover that it was an ONI Black Operation, spearheaded by no other than the people at ONISAD. UNSC was originally perceived as a godly like faction, sweeping through the Milky Way and liberating planets besieged by Reapers. But now they were looked on with great suspicion. Hell, even the postponed conference was beginning to stir some suspicion. They had always been conveniently put off.

Conspiracy theorists were having one field day with the exposure. But that was not what Sarah really cared about right now. Her time with ONISAD had forged strong ties and friendships. She'd never thought she'd say it, but she no longer considered the Operatives as monsters, but as normal men forced into extraordinary circumstances.

General Keyes had already briefed her on what was going to happen. She was genuinely surprised that he wanted her help in the rescue of Doctor Halsey considering their past. Maybe it was a way of reconciliation or a crude joke. Either way, it didn't matter. Outside of ONISAD, she knew that she was the most suitable for the job.

This isn't my first rodeoâ€|

Upon reaching the lounges, she noticed there was a significant decrease in light intensity. Thanks to rapid interior designs, areas that catered to recreation were much more beautiful to look at than their predecessors.

She entered a room marked; _Lounge Five_. She knew that Fifth Element would be in there going through preparations and planning. They didn't use the conference rooms curiously enough. But upon entering the room, she could see why they preferred to use a lounge.

Along the windows were recliners with blankets draped lazily over them. They served as the quick nap station. Along the cream white walls were light timber counters holding drinks and food. In the centre of the room was a large table supporting and surrounded by holoprojectors. Half eaten plates of steak sandwiches and sushi lay on unused counters with one of the men going back and forth to grab a bite. This was pretty much the stereotypical planning room of ONISAD Teams in the field. She also noted that they weren't wearing business attire, but military combat fatigues instead.

"Sarah, glad you could join us," Adrian greeted neutrally as he grabbed a mug of hot chocolate.

"_Anthony_," Palmer replied. She was unsure if she should use his real name.

"You can call me Adrian now, it doesn't really matter anymore," he shrugged grimly.

Sarah's chest constricted as a tingling sensation crawled down her spine. "What?"

"This should enlighten you," Thorne said, setting down his plate. He wiped his fingers on a piece of tissue, and entered a few commands into his computer. The central display then projected the most news following the Cerberus Exposure.

The first article revealed something very disturbing; _Identities of Arcani Assassins._

"What the hell happened?" she asked.

"It's only logical," Riley said grimly. He walked over to the counter to refill his mug of coffee. "Parangosky wrapped up Cerberus in a flag so Osman can tie it around our necks."

"If anything, those two are now folk-heroes," Thorne added.

"All first batch Operatives have been revealed," Adrian said with a seething anger. He rubbed his upper lip as he glared at the screen running through the list of photos and names.

_Arca â€" Adrian James Chen
>Alias: Simon Kien Wu, Ryan Zhu-Kron, Dylan Jeong Norton, Anthony Stanforth Zhuge

Briar â€" Gabriel Thorne

Sandman â€" Riley James Sanderson

_Bishop â€" Frank Hugh Ryans
>Alias: Samuel Deven Kreutz, David Jason Mills

The list went on, it's most recent entry was prior to Keyes's promotion to director of ONI, causing Sarah to wonder why her name wasn't on their. They had said that she wasn't ONISAD, but she had participated in sensitive Operationsâ€| maybe her past had something to do with it. Parangosky and Osman had unanimously selected her to lead be a senior officer of SPARTAN Branch.

"Can I point out that my name isn't on there," Palmer added casually.

"You were a 'liaison', even though you participated in missions," Adrian gestured the quotations in the air. "I don't think you're enough of a _threat_ to attract attention."

"Flattering," Sarah said flatly as she leaned against a table top.

Blaze and Viper, whom Sarah had learnt were Blake and Vincent respectively, were scribbling something down on their notepads. Despite man's technological advancement, they were still old-fashioned. But then again they had to be, electronic devise flared up on sensors.

"Twins, run us through the scenario," Adrian ordered.

The two brothers moved to the central console and back tracked the intel.

"SkyWatch picked up Halsey's biometrics leaving Council Space. SkySentry tracked her to Thezar. Preliminary scans and Recon from the Shadow Broker's network suggests that Halsey is here, at Bakura," Blake pointed to a high-lighted settlement on the planet's emerald and tanned surface.

"The city has jammers. The moment she reached its limits, biometrics lost her," Vincent added, "high altitude FOF scanners aren't having much luck finding her either."

"So we have to go to ground to find her," Sarah stated.

"Yes," Vincent nodded, "They're jamming frequencies are shaped into a dome via Mass Effect fields. Communications on ground will work so long as you're within the dome."

"Game plan?" Palmer asked.

"The place is crawling with militia and mercenaries all with varying skills and equipment, everyone who can hold a gun will shoot at us," Thorne said.

"We will infiltrate the city with disguised Bullhounds and Warthogs, skycars are a luxury here that people don't want," Adrian added. "We will go in wearing Urban Infiltration. Blaze and Viper will be in the Electronics Warfare Bullhound to try and track Halsey's tag. Spartan-Fours will provide perimeter security."

â€|

****BAKURA REGION, THEZAR****

John felt the Bullhound bump as it drove over a pothole in the road; it was probably made by an IED or a mine. He looked at the task force's disguised convoy glistening under the afternoon sun of Thezar. The Bullhounds and Warthogs had received a new paint job and had bags filled with foam slapped on the side. No one gave them a second glance as they passed through the slums.

Rickety prefab shelters stood side by side like drunks relying on each other to stand up. A couple of billboards had been welded into the side of the stacks of prefab shelters to provide the occupants shelter from the tropical freak thunder storms that passed through every now and then.

However today, the skies were sapphire blue and a couple of clouds floating lazily above. Thezar was considered to be a garden planet, rich with flora and fauna. But crime from the Terminus System had brought a wave of violent thugs onto the planet. The slums and the forests were locked in a stalemate, fighting for dominance over the land.

Some of the prefab shelters were covered in moss and vines, with barely enough plant life cleared away for the doors. This place could be considered to be the next Omega but with natural life. Many of the people here worked in the eezo and iridium mines, controlled by warlords and crimelords. But as of late, Blue Suns and Blood Pack had been encroaching on the territories of previous occupants.

John could see the tell-tale signs of heavy fighting the Mercenary Conglomerates and Militia. Freelancers were also reported to be in this area too, but mainly hired by the warlords as the Blood Pack and Blue Suns looked down on anyone who weren't flying colours.

"Looks like the Talons are here as well," Jane commented, gesturing towards a large red graffiti on the billboard.

John eased up on the steering wheel as he looked out the window. He guessed as much that the dominant group after Cerberus's attack on Omega would be here. They were probably out doing "humanitarian" work. And it looked that way too; people who lived near the marked places appeared to be healthier.

"This place is still a shithole though," Shepard mused, "Aria must love it here."

"Probably," John shrugged.

Jane tugged the sleeve of her shirt and rolled them up to her elbow pads to give that extra level of authenticity.

The entire task force was wearing derivatives of their usual armour outfitted for Urban Incursions. Nano-titanium/carbon composite triweave suits were a thing of beauty in John's opinion. They could easily resist cutting and small arms fire, at the same time they could modify themselves aesthetically to look like casual civilian clothing or combat fatigues of another faction.

Hanging a left down the road, John followed the lead Bullhound. Everyone had unanimously chosen to forgo the Warthog for this mission, it was far too iconic. The Bullhound had yet to achieve the same stardom, and it was capable of having more disguises.

There were exactly thirty-six Spartan-IVs participating in this mission, most of them were Spartan-IIIs. All of them respected Halsey, and had been handpicked by Keyes. They were the best in the Branch, and a superb track record. Adrian and John had agreed the SIVs would provide perimeter security.

The assault or grab team, was composed of Fifth Element (aside from Blaze and Viper), John, Shepard and Palmer. They would pinpoint Halsey's location and move into grab her, while the security team would rush to defensive positions.

If everything went well, then no shots would be fired and no one would know that had been here. But this was Parangosky they were talking about; somewhere along the line she was going to jump them. John just hoped they would be fast enough to get out of anything she had planned for them.

"Alright, we've entered the jamming dome," Adrian broadcasted on the encrypted channels. "The only way we're going to be able to talk to our people upstairs is through SPL."

"Copy that," John clicked back.

Shepard prepared the weapons, attaching components onto the rails. John liked the new weapons available for the Special Forces. The GrimMod2's design had been based upon hours of research and field testing. Its size was perfect for a Spartan to handle with superb precision and achieve maximum stopping power at maximum range. In fact, a lot of the sniper teams were adopting it as the secondary weapon.

By the time Shepard had placed John's weapon next to him, the task force had reached a two kilometer clearing which separated the districts. Talon controlled a piece of land in the rough and tumble areas of the colony, the infrastructure there was weathered and weary. Looking out of the windscreen, John could see the defensive positions the Blue Suns had built to defend their territory.

Usually this would be a cause of concern, but having friends in high places helped. Liara T'Soni had used her networks of contacts to get the task force through the Blue Suns territory undisturbed.

The turian guards at the checkpoint verified the documentation before allowing the convoy through without searching the vehicles.

Instantly, John could see a massive difference in the standard of living here. The infrastructure, apartment blocks and houses were absolutely impressive and phenomenal. Basically anyone who got rich illegally and were on the run from the law would end up here. It was a comfortable place to live and coordinate their resources while they paid the Blue Suns and a Security Firm for protection.

Of course there was run specific rule here, no skycars allowed. Everyone here drove a ground vehicle, and everyone here looked at the convoy suspiciously. Funnily enough, in the heart of the most notorious, the convoy would have the least chance of being attacked. These people had bigger things to worry about than a Black Operations Team.

"I've got a faint signal on Halsey's tags," Blaze said over the COMs.

Fifth Element was in the Bullhound behind the Chief.

"What's here status?" John asked.

"Hard to tell, Jay," the Operative answered.

"Do you have a fix on her location?"

"Drones are, triangulating now," there was a pause. "Damn. She's twenty klicks north of our position."

John could hear murmurs of cussing over the channels.

"I'm bringing up a holograph of her location now," Vincent said.

The central holoprojector in the Bullhound flared to life as it displayed an intricate 3D layout of a ten story building. It was clearly a slum building. Penetrating scans from the drones revealed that the building was filled with people, most were vorchas, batarians and krogan; and each one was armed in more ways than one.

"Damn," Shepard muttered.

The graph zoomed in on the ninth floor, where Halsey was being held. She was being held in a very large room with no windows, and by the looks of things it was well decorated. This was clearly the HQ of the local leadership.

"Do we know who's holding her?" Jane asked.

"Blood Pack by the looks of things," Blaze answered.

Halsey was tied to a chair, and had her head bowed down. Her body language suggested that she was sleeping, but had sustained no major injuries. But the scans don't always tell the truth. For all John could tell, the scientist could be badly bloodied like Shepard last time. He still had recurring dreams from that incident.

"You think the Blood Pack is selling her off?" Riley asked.

"Yes, otherwise they would've left her alone or killed her," Adrian replied.

Vincent picked up the channels once more. "We've got news from upstairs that we have Covenant inbound."

"What?" Sarah almost yelled.

"Covenant, or at least former with pirates," Cortana added, her ground infiltration platform was in the back of John's Bullhound, "mostly Jackals and Grunts, and some Brutes."

"What transports are they coming in on?"

"Ten Phantoms and twenty Banshees, ETA thirty minutes. Divinus is already waving off to hunt and kill the Covenant ship."

"We can hold off those numbers," Rook said.

"Here's the plan ladies and gentlemen," Adrian interrupted. The 3D display began to shift and highlight key areas of interest.

"Fireteam Crimson, you'll be coming with us to watch our six. Majestic, Emerald and Hammer will move to engage and eliminate the Covies. Rook, you'll be in charge of the interception force."

"Copy that."

"You all know what to do people," Palmer said, "let's get Halsey and get home in one piece."

Upon leaving the Blue Suns district, the entire convoy accelerated, shooting down the dirt road. This was going to be an unconventional snatch and grab operation. Task Force Operatives are to advanced and take their objectives aggressively.

They were headed into Blood Pack territory, the rundown slums of Bakura. Unlike the Blue Suns, the Blood pack had not set up any perimeter defences. The convoy joined a long line of vehicles passing in and out of the rundown place, and began to crawl to their destination.

This made the men jumpy, the more time they spent out here, the smaller their window of opportunity would be. Rook and his detachment broke off from the main segment and swung around the city a full speed. Dirt from the road was kicked up into the air as the Bullhounds ploughed through the ditches.

John steered his vehicle through the maze of rusting shipping containers and prefab shelters cramped with people and salvage. One by one, the convoy broke off as teams departed for their sectors. Eventually, all that was left were three Bullhounds heading towards Halsey's location.

With rough planning but real time intelligence, the task force managed to cordon the target area off. John his vehicle up into the main courtyard, filled with Blood Pack Mercenaries. Vorchas rocket troops lined the adjacent five story buildings. But the Blood Pack never had the chance to open fire when they were cut down mercilessly.

Manning the controls of the turrets, Shepard squeezed the trigger and let forth a barrage of savage energy. The bolts easily bypassed the kinetic barriers and cooked the innards of the resilient species. Defenders from fortified positions managed to engage the Bullhound, but other Spartan teams had set up fire positions on the elevated highway and nearby buildings.

Molten metal and sparks were sent flying as the task force unloaded torrential fire on enemy positions. Vorchas carrying rockets exploded in a gore-like fireball, taking their own comrades with them.

Krograns entered a bloodlust as the poured out of the fortifications, but some didn't make it as the Spartan fireteams overwhelmed them with terrifying accuracy and firepower. Under the cover of friendly fire, John, Shepard, Fhajang, Cortana and Thane dashed from the Bullhound and ran towards the main entrance. Vega jumped into the fire control seat and kept up the heavy barrage of fire.

Once the defenders were cleared out, the security teams turned their attention outward to keep reinforcements at bay.

So far so good, John thought.

He charged up to the door and covered Shepard as she used her biotics to rip down the offending structure. Thane was the first to move in; a quick burst from the Grim and a trio of vorcha hit the dirty concrete floor.

John strafed left into the main corridor and opened fire on a charging krogan. The sizzling bolts burrowed deep into the massive being's head, stopping him dead in his tracks. John stepped over his body and proceeded to the stairs with the rest of the team in tow.

"Heads up Chief, you've got hostiles coming down the stairs on the second floor," Vincent warned.

Fhajad pulled the pin from a frag grenade and tossed it into the stairwell. Screams were barely registered before the device exploded and showered the Blood Pack with shrapnel.

No longer in a hardlight body, Cortana was able to provide superb tactical and firesupport for ground forces. She used the Grim to deadly effect as she kept the side rooms suppressed. Thanks to advanced sensors, she knew exactly where to shoot. Having spent years observing Spartan behaviour, she moved just like one of them, though nowhere near as fast.

"Chief, we've breached the southern end, we're moving up to level two," Arca said over the COMs.

"Copy, we'll draw them off."

The fight up the building was surprisingly efficient as Spartan snipers methodically eliminated any well hidden resistance with their Epirus Sniper Rifles loaded out with Raufoss ammunition. John's eyes picked up the smouldering holes punched through the thick concrete, and the bodies turned to shreds.

Upon reaching the eighth floor, that was when things started to get a bit difficult. Armour plates and kinetic barriers prevented the sniper teams from being effective, thus leaving the assault teams to their own devices.

Simultaneously, both teams appeared from their end of the stairwell and caught the Blood Pack off guard. But there was only one way to get onto the upper levels, and that was the heavily defended central stair case.

The teams fanned out and cleared out every room methodically before moving on into the foyer. John was set on by a rampaging krogan the moment he opened a door. The gigantic alien bull rushed the Spartan with a roar, and slammed him into the opposite wall. Without thinking, the Chief extended his wrist blade, and rammed the plasma tipped blade home. The crimson krogan let out a blood curling growl before dropping dead to the floor.

In the next room, one pyro tried to get the jump on Cortana. But its face could only be described as shock when its flame thrower blasted at the platform, but saw no burning flesh. Aside from a few carbon

streaks on her cheeks, the AI was still fully functional and pissed.

"Not nice," she growled, and fired a short burst. The vorcha dropped dead, coating the motley eaten carpet with its own blood.

Pressing down the hall, there were fewer incidents of resistance. Vincent and Blake provided valuable intel on the fly, keeping the team a few steps ahead of their opponents.

"Krogan with a heavy gun!" Jane cried. She threw up a biotic shield, taking the brunt of the barrage and protecting her teammates.

Fifth Element used the temporary distraction to outflank the defenders, and rained down a well-aimed fire storm. Blood Pack mercenaries shuddered and shook violently as hyper velocity rounds punched through their thick skin and shredded their insides.

Proceeding up onto the ninth floor where Catherine was held, John checked the perimeter with his optics. Twelve hostiles were inside the maze of corridors; all of them were krogan specialists. While Fifth Element prepared to breach on their end, John and Cortana placed charges on the walls, instead of the doors which were in the killzone.

"Waiting on your go," Adrian said.

John's team stacked up. "Execute!"

In less than a heartbeat, multiple breaching charges detonated simultaneously. The Chief was the first to enter the bizarrely designed floor. He fired the first shot and killed the krogan to his left, but the one to his right unleashed a biotic shockwave. He didn't have the time to react before he was lifted high into the air than what was expected.

Landing on his back, Shepard was quickly by his side and shielded him from enemy fire. "You okay?"

John groggily nodded. There was no way a biotic attack like that should've bounced him around like that. He could tell by the flare of the shockwave that it was nowhere near as powerful as the attacks Shepard used against him when they were sparing.

"I'm fine," he said, pulling himself to his feet.

With the hallway cleared and all that remained were twelve dead krogans with smouldering heads. The two teams prepared to breach Halsey's holding room. Shepard positioned herself away from the walls. Her body was covered in an ethereal glow as she tore the doors apart.

"Clear!" Thorne shouted as he entered.

John swept the room, before he and Cortana walked over to Doctor Halsey. Thanks to Keyes's scientific breakthroughs, the creator and the created looked like twins

"Can you move, Doctor?" the AI asked. Her clean appearance stood out

in contrast to Halsey's tattered clothes and cut skin.

She nodded, as John cut the restraints and eased her onto her feet.

Sarah moved along the left walls, making sure there were no hidden threats with her scanners.

"_Sarah, you shouldn't have come here. I thought we had a deal," _the voice clearly belonging to Parangosky boomed from the speakers.

"What the bloody hell does that mean?" Riley asked, his voice borderline growling.

"It doesn'tâ€¦" Adrian never finished what he was going to say.

The wall on the left side of the room was punctured by a Raufoss round. Concrete and incendiary sprayed into the room as the tungsten carbide penetrator found its mark in Adrian's gut. Everyone could only stare in horror as the Operative doubled over with a billowing fountain of blood pouring out of his back.

"Adrian!" Riley bellowed.

John could hear an increase in tempo of gunfire on the security team's end as they engaged the new threat. He quickly tapped Riley on his shoulder to pull him out of his stunned state.

The whole assault team exploded into action as John pulled Doctor Halsey away from the room and into the safety of the corridor. A shockwave tore throughout the entire building, shaking its foundations apart. Feeling his stomach rise, Riley swore inwardly.

"This whole place is coming down!" Shepard yelled.

She and Krios instinctively threw up a biotic field to protect everyone. Riley heard the support struts groan as timed explosive ripped through the building. He looked up just in time to see a large chunk of debris break itself against the biotic shield.

The floors began to crack and splinter, falling away from under them. John felt his stomach rise as he entered free fall, but there was nothing he could do inside a collapsing building.

â€¦

"Adrian!" Riley screamed. "Adrian, where are you?"

He scrambled frantically through the rubble searching for any sign of his friend, but the sensors weren't showing anything.

They blew him up!

In a vain attempt to find a body, Sanderson hauled large chunks of concrete and tossed them aside.

We're just on the ninth floor, he has to be here somewhere!

"Sandman, it's no use," Thorne yelled over the gunfire. He tried to pull Riley away, but to no avail. The Operative just shrugged him off and continued digging.

"He's got to be here!" Riley cried desperately. "He has to!"

"He's gone," Thorne said softly. "We got to leave now!"

Dejectedly, Riley was on his knees and dropped his head. "Shit," he whispered.

"We got to go!" Palmer urged, "Or we're not going to get out of here alive!"

Reality and rationality hit, Riley was suddenly aware of how delicate the situation was. As much as it pained him, he had to leave a friend behind. He could feel the throbbing sensation in the back of his heart as he began to jog away from the rubble and linked up with the task force.

Everyone was ready to go, and not wanting to push their luck, the entire convoy floored it out of the city. It had been a "successful" operation, but no one was celebrating tonight. Halsey was taking it just as difficult as Riley was as she had met Adrian on occasion when he was at school with Essingdon.

Sitting in the rear of the Bullhound, Riley eased off his helmet and pulled down the shemagh that covered his face. He looked out the camera viewports, not caring about the Blood Pack that tried to give chase.

This was not how he imagined his best friend to go down. He had always wanted Adrian to reconcile with his family, and lead a semblance of a normal life.

"_You leave normal behind the moment you join,"_ Riley remembered him say,

The task force had already done a number on the Mercs, by the time they reached the clearing divide; the convoy was no longer under an attack. They drove back through the Blue Suns and Talon held territory before leaving the jammed region.

A contingent of Albatross dropships and ODSTs waited to take them back to _Divinus_.

Feeling the clamps click into place as Thorne steered the Bullhound into the docking port, Riley threw a quick glance at Palmer. The words of Parangosky replayed over in his mind continuously. He didn't notice the craft had lifted off, and soon enough, Riley was standing in the bay of _Divinus_.

He kept his gaze steady on Palmer as she left the hangar. He eyed her suspiciously as he continued to replay those words in his mind.

He decided to walk to the armour bay where everyone was headed. Upon entering the expansive chambers with robotic discs laid neatly along each level, Riley spotted Palmer walking onto the main catwalk.

She had a saddened look on her face. It was a look that all veterans were far too familiar with; seeing a friend die before their very eyes. But Riley didn't care, he wanted answers. A friend died today.

Without hesitation, Riley ran up to Sarah and punched her across the jaw. The Spartan-IV Commander dropped the floor with a shocked expression. He had expected her to put up a fight, but she didn't.

Everyone quickly ran towards the two and formed a rough circle. Thorne quickly moved into restrain Riley, while John stepped between him and Palmer who was being helped off the floor by Shepard.

"Want to tell us what the fuck that was all about?" Riley spat. "What kind of fucking deal did you do!"

Sarah made eye contact with Riley, and sighed. Her posture was slumped, lacking the commanding presence she usually had. The Spartan-IVs stood defensively, ready to subdue Riley if need be. But it looked like Thorne had it covered.

"Well, Palmer?" Sanderson growled, "Care to tell us? What kind of deal did you do with Parangosky?"

"I was doing wetwork back in twenty-five-sixty," Sarah answered.

"What kind, you fucking hypocrite?" Riley's tone was becoming more aggressive by the second.

But Palmer made no move to out intimidate him. "Assassination."

"I'm guessing Halsey?" He could see the Doctor in the corner of his eye.

"There was never a deal," Sarah said.

"Bullshit," Riley cut her off, "then why the fuck would Piss face mention it?"

"I carried out hits on ONISAD."

"You BITCH!" Sandman roared. He lashed out, but Thorne kept his grip firm. "You fucking hypocritical BITCH!"

This was a conversation that should've been conducted in private, but it really didn't matter anymore. Parangosky had released private information on ONI's Operations, what more can Palmer's dirty secret do? The Spartan-IVs standing around were in shock, but they said nothing. They weren't the bunch that was at odds with SOGs, in fact they had a grudging respect for the UNSC's Assassins.

All of them were divided on this issue, so they decided to sit on the fence and stop anyone from being killed.

"Before I knew him well enough, Parangosky ordered me to carry out a hit on Adrian," Palmer said painfully. This topic was sensitive and raw to her.

"So this was it, huh?" Riley yelled, "A way to finish that long standing mission so it doesn't look bad in your record?"

Sanderson's words were irrational at best by this point, but they still stung and cut deep.

"Adrian stopped me, and offered me a way out. I don't know how he did, but Parangosky rescinded the hit," Palmer explained. "He gave me a way out."

"Only thing is, you can never really leave."

Sarah nodded. "There was no deal. Just orders to monitor Fifth. You had nothing to do with it."

"The moment you killed one of our own, you bet it's our fucking business!"

"Look, I'm sorry," Palmer said sincerely. "I really am. Adrian gave me a way out."

"C'mon Riley, you know Parangosky is trying to string us," Thorne interjected. "That's what she wants."

"They she can have what she wants!" Riley roared. "I'm not working with someone who's killed our own!"

That seemed to be the last straw for Sarah.

"Your people killed my cousin!" she screamed. "Fair is fair!"

"They were renegades!"

"Enough!" John interrupted. "Thorne, take Riley up to observation deck four."

"Yes, Chief."

"C'mon," Thorne beckoned, "cool off, and we can talk about this later."

Riley shrugged out of Gabriel's grip. "I'm going to go talk to Alice. Then I need to call Julia and Delilahâ€¦ now I know how he feels."

"Are you going to be okay?" Thorne asked as they left the bay.

"I'll be fine."

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"_I always looked up to JJ, I wanted to grow up to be like him. But looking back on it all, I wonder if he's proud of me. I wonder if my family is proud of me. Would be nice if they did, but I'm just kidding myself. I knew the cost of joiningâ€¦ I just couldn't comprehend it at the time."

>_**-Arca**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Well there we go.****

****What do you guys think? Please leave a review and let me know.****

57. The Flying Fu?

****A/N: Start of term exams have finished. So, that gives me a small window to write another chapter for you lot. Enjoy.****

****A/N:****

****I swear I will rewrite the first segment of this storyâ€|****

****XXxxXX****

_"There was blood upon the risers, there were brains upon the chute,

>Intestines were a-dangling from his paratrooper suit,
He was a mess, they picked him up and poured him from his boots,

>And he ain't gonna jump no more.
Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,

>Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,
Gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,

>He ain't gonna jump no more!"
__**-2nd Division Airborne singing
Blood on the Risers****, before performing a HALO jump over New
Campton II during the Coalition-Covenant War**_

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD **_**UMBRA**_**, NEAR THESSIA****

Liara looked at the display monitors in her office. In just over a few weeks, the Reapers had been forgotten and everyone focused on the Flood. She still had incoming reports of Reaper activity, but the sentient starships were mainly concerned with strengthening their own "territories".

"Doctor T'Soni, Agent Fal has sent you her report."

"Thank you Glyph."

The Asari Scientist pulled up the report and projected them onto the main screen. Her eyes scrolled along the articleâ€| same news, nothing new. The Flood was pressing on into territory once held by the Reapers and there was little that could be done to stop them.

Coalition Deployment of the Halo Array had served to slow down the parasitic surge considerably, but no one could've ever guessed that Mass Effect fields could've dampened the Array effects. It was apparent that the only way to defeat the Flood was conventional warfare. There was no ace in the hole weapon like the Crucible.

"Doctor T'Soni, Agent Mirilith has forward you a message broadcasted by Asari High Command. It has been marked urgent."

"Could you please bring it up on screen?"

"Of course, Doctor."

The central screen pulsed and winked, the moment those words fell upon Liara's eyes, her world came to a grinding halt.

Flood presence detected. All available forces are to pull back to Thessia.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**DIVINUS**_**, IN SLIPSPACE, EN ROUTE TO THE CITADEL****

"Okay, I'm going to just say it," Thorne sighed, "that was dickish of you."

Riley looked at the Spartan with his arms crossed. They were back in the lounge room they had commandeered for their mission planning.

"What was dickish of me?"

"Punching Palmer," Gabe elaborated, "I mean, sure she can be a handful at times but jeez."

Sanderson began to laugh with such mirth that it was downright bone chilling. Thorne just stared at him as if the ONISAD Operative had lost his sanity. Regardless, Gabe continued.

"And that little tantrum of yours, that doesn't make any sense. I can understand part of it after all that's happened, but in all honestyâ€¦| what the hell?"

Riley fished out a data-crystal from his pocket and grinned.

"Okay, I'm lost."

"Palmer and I staged that," Sanderson said.

Thorne could see a hint of pain in the man's eyes; he soon began to catch on.

"I guess it was a pretty dickish thing to use your best friend's death as cover, but Adrian wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

Gabriel took a sip from his coffee and held it in his hands as he gave Riley a look which said; _the hell?_

"We go rolling in with a task force, no way in hell they would've gotten Adrian unless they knew exactly where he was. We've got a leak."

Thorne didn't buy it. It was a bit farfetched, but then again these men had taken down terror cells with much less.

"Mind running that by me again?"

Riley clasped his hands, cradling the crystal.

"Vincent and Blake had tracked some irregular signals from the Spartan-Fours. They needed a distraction to copy the data. Here, have a look at this."

Sanderson placed the crystal into an isolated console and brought the information up on screen.

"When Adrian was hit, I noticed that the angle of impact indicated that the shooter was on a lower level. As much as we like to leave the lightest footprint, we never shoot upwards in this scenario."

"You're saying one of the Fours with us got him," Thorne growled.

Riley nodded.

"Blake and Vincent guessed the same, so they started digging. I told Palmer I needed her help to create a distraction."

"Does she know?"

Sanderson shook his head.

"So it was all just a distractionâ€¦"

"I'm not going to lie; it felt pretty good hitting her."

Gabe shot him another look.

"If she can take on a Brute Chieftain without augmentations," Riley extenuated, "then she can take a punch from me."

"So are you two best buddies or something?"

"No we still hate each other," Sanderson deadpanned.

Thorne frowned and let out a sigh as he leaned back into his chair. "Can I ask why?"

"She's a Helljumper, I'm a Blood Talon. And well, first time I heard of her, I thought she'd be the humble caring type."

"She isn't, is she?"

Riley shook his head in agreement. "After Okinawa I had enough of her."

"So just to be sure. You punched Palmer, she agreed to it, so you could create a distraction for Blake and Vincent to find the insiders. And they did that by downloading armour info. I'm assuming that Cortana couldn't do it because this information is on a separate isolated system inside the MJOLNIR."

Sanderson smiled. "Good man."

"Okay then," Thorne said. He didn't sound fully convinced but he bought it just to save himself from a headache.

"Best if we never talk about this ever again.
Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Can I add that you were convincing at some parts and not so much at other parts? I mean, Palmer 'admitting' to killing one of our ownâ€| seriously?"

"Close enough," Riley shrugged.

"So are we going to look at the data then?" Thorne gestured towards the console.

Riley shook his head. "I'm letting the twins handle it."

The two lapsed into a comfortable silence drinking their coffee until the COMs chimed. Thorne entered a few keys into the console, bringing up a message from Essingdon.

_Thessia is under attack, report to _Night Horse.

****XXxxXX****

"_Hello everyone, things have been strange here latelyâ€| I can't say what's going on, but something's just wrong. I don't want to be a pessimist but I have this feeling that I'm never going to see home again. So, I prepared these journals for my future siblings. I know Quan would like to have a younger brother, you should listen to her. But can I ask that you name him Adrian?"
>_**-JunJie "JJ" Chen, sending final messages and journal entries to his family two nights before the Battle of Circinius IV, and his death**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Extremely short, I know.****

****But this is to say that I'm still alive and to address widespread concern.****

â€|

****I'm bringing this story's focus back to Chief and Shepard. I'll admit I kind of chickened out on developing them further after certain protests from readers. But hey, I miss writing about the Chief and Shep primarily so back to the roots we go.****

****Sidenote, I gave John a name simply because I felt that you can only portray him to be a stoic character for so long. However I have yet to do an actual confirmationâ€| remember ONISAD going by cover names for a very long time?***

****Writing about action for a long duration does become extremely taxing and I doubt that people would read through it all.****

â€|

****Gloss over readingâ€¦| okay I guess this is much as my fault as it is yours. I'll try to make defining points and moments more pronounced considering that a lot of people skip over it.****

â€¦|

****OC's, I rarely get attached to the OCs I make but ONISAD fellas are growing on me.****

â€¦|

****Rewrite, yes, I will rewrite the first few chapters at some point to bring them up to the same calibre as the rest of the story and probably add in a few Shep/Chief moments, (NOTE: These will not be romantic moments).****

****I will also put in Chief's Arcani history in as well. And add in the Legion's Loyalty Mission.****

â€¦|

****If you're after romance, read ****_**Trust**_****. That way, I won't be wrongly flamed.****

â€¦|

****More naval space battles ahead, there'll be a battle for Thessia.****

â€¦|

****Now here's where I ask what would you like to see?****

****(ShadowDog1, you've made your point very clear about not wanting romance to be a centrepiece of this story. That's fine. Your request has been noted)****

****Would you like to see more war? Personal scope on characters? Galactic Politics?****

****I haven't reached writers block, but I would like to know what you would all like to see in this story.****

****Please leave a review and let me know.****

â€¦|

****As a side request, please don't leave baseless criticism. If you see a segment lacking in punctuality and rife with grammatical errors, please point me towards them (just which chapter and where approximately). It takes me a very long time to trudge through the entire story to root them out.****

****Please note that I will only adhere to certain English Dialects when a character is talking and there is a noticeable difference in pronunciation. E.g.****

****Miranda Keyes will say "mom, aluminum," whereas Essingdon Keyes will say "mum, aluminium."****

****Both however will *_**'say'*_**; "armour and colour," because well, that's self-explanatory.****

â€|

****That all being done and said, next Chapter's going to take a while to write. I aim for it to be my next master piece!****

â€|

****Also, who still wants to see a conference chapter? I know a lot of you have been asking for one. So please leave a review and let me know your personal opinion on where you would like to see this story go. (Note: I have all major points planned out; I just want to know what little things you would like to see).****

58. Unto Athame

Posted on the 10th of June 2013****

New-Author's Notes:****

Hello Everyone,****

_It is with a heavy heart that I have to tell you this, but as one of Andrithir's best friends I feel that it is my duty to inform you what has happened. Andrithir has been involved in a car accident on the way back home after celebrating his 18**__**th**__** Birthday. **_**

The nature surrounding Andrithir's accident is something that I find completely unjust and disturbing. He was sitting in the back seat on the left side, asleep with his head resting against the window. Another car failed to stop and ploughed into Andrithir's parent's car, at the very spot he was sitting. His parents have walked away with minor injuries, but he's in a coma and the doctors have told us to prepare for the worst.****

I cannot explain the pain this has caused us as he is a major part of our lives, and that anyone who knew him would consider themselves lucky to be called his friend. His dream of becoming a writer is something that is not known to many people. Only his closest friends and those who share the same interests know about his literary escapades.****

In our previous discussions, he wished that I take up the mantle of continuing on with his stories, should he be unable to. Of course I can barely hope to match his writing style. People of Andrithir's calibre are rare, and those he considers his betters are even more so. A few of our closest friends and talented writers have banded with me to continue on Andrithir's beloved hobby so that his legacy may continue. Rest assured he has left a notebook behind detailing where he has planned for this story to go.****

_Hope to see you again on our next adventure, old friend. Should the worst come to pass, I can only hope that I've finished your story**

the way you dreamed it to be, and that it honours your memory.**_

**Sam**

â€|

**Below are the notes belonging to Andrithir, he has yet to finish this chapter, so my friends and I have broken this into completed segments.**

A/N: There's a writing convention that I totally forgot about this entire timeâ€| well maybe it's not really conventional. But anyhow, from now on, I'm going to italicise COM speak as well, just to make it easier for people to readâ€| not that I've been getting complaints about that or anything.

Btw, Spock is a character in the Halo sectionâ€| WHAT!? Whutuh!?

Also, the promised rewrite is coming, and I'll squeeze in the conference scene before the Fall of Rannoch.

XXxxXX

THESSIA

The air was thick with ozone and wisps of plasma as the ODST Droppods screamed in from above. Sammi braced herself against the impact and sighed in relief when she felt the rumbling thud. Her pod had just embedded itself into a walkway overpass in the Asari architecture.

Green lights winked and the alarm chimed, half a second later the doors blew open. Training soon kicked in as Salas threw herself out of the pod and swept the area. More of her people soon arrived and formed a defensive perimeter.

"Jesus, look at that," one of her men whispered.

Sammi turned her gaze towards the sun setting over the distant cluster of skyscrapers. Polarisers kicked in and shielded her eyes from the UV rays.

"My god," she uttered.

Utter chaos, Thessia was in utter chaos. The skies were filled with burning debris leaving a trail of smoke in their wake. Towering metal constructs were covered in vines of Flood biomass spewing out clouds of spores. Hundreds of flying beasts soared through the air and pummelled the defenders with their head mounted cannons or powerful talons.

"Stay low, and hug the walls," Salas ordered.

Her company complied and instinctively fanned out. The Flood had attacked Thessia with such force and without forewarning that the planet was virtually defenceless when the parasite arrived. Token SkyGuardian Networks barely halted the invasion before they were

swept aside by the torrential onslaught.

Sammi doubted that Group 7 could turn the tide any better. They needed at least a combined Coalition Fleet to have any chance of halting the aggression.

"We've got our Charlie-Foxtrots up ahead, fifty meters due north of us," one of her scouts whispered.

"Copy, switch to Scofic," Huntress ordered.

A low pitch of clicks and whines emanated from the guns as the Helljumpers swapped out weapon components in rapid succession.

Salas motioned for her people to take up a defensive wedge formation around the courtyard. Green lights winked, signalling that everyone was in position. Huntress clicked back, and sent the order. A half second later, silencers coughed as volatile rounds found their mark inside the assimilated sacks of flesh.

The former asaris shuddered and jerked violently as their insides were torn up and burned by the bullets. They fell to the ground with wispy grey smoke and a horrid stench curling up from their shattered bodies.

"Scratch one," one of the Helljumpers commented.

"Keep it tight, people," Salas ordered.

"I've got a visual on the Arbiter's unit!" Dubbo gestured.

Despite undergoing numerous social changes, the Sangheili still held a staunch belief that even the greatest of leaders must fight alongside those of lesser standings. This was most likely the first time the Arbiter has fought in over a few hundred years.

â€|

"Time for battle my dear brothers!" Thel roared.

The other Elites let out their battle cry and charged into the fray. Plasma swords crackled and hissed as they were activated, leaving a trail of wispy blue air in their wake. The Arbiter fired a shot burst from his Type-240 Plasma Rifle; the bolts of hissing blue boiled away the flesh of the nearest combat form. The assimilated Asari howled, thrashing its tentacle wildly, but the momentum from the Arbiter's charge reduced it to a sickly mass of flesh.

A powerful stench assaulted his olfactory sense but years of discipline stopped the majestic Sangheili from gagging.

"Hunter, fire on the parasites to your left," Vadam ordered.

The powerful beast nodded and turned to bear. He lifted his heavy weapons arm and fired a devastating pulse of emerald green. Thel caught the outline of a Flood Behemoth for just a second before it was reduced to nothing.

Hunters were effectively walking tanks, encased inside their extremely durable armour and armed with a composite shield and hybrid

mounted cannon, it was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. The Multi-Purpose Type-277 Direct Energy Cannon was capable of performing a variety of rolls which spanned from anti-infantry to building clearing to anti-tank work. This made the Hunter an extremely valuable resource when fighting the Flood.

"Onwards!" Thel rallied.

The unit of Special Operations Elites in their black armour followed their leader without hesitation. They used their combination of arm mounted shields and weapons to great effect as they moved with interlocking fields of fire. As long as they remained calm and didn't break, every single one of them would get to see another day.

The objective of their mission was to delay the Flood onslaught and allow as many Asari to escape as possible. Thel led his troops down onto a charred courtyard where the silvery metal still glowed red hot from merciless onslaught.

Asari were not built for a war of attrition, they relied heavily on guerrilla tactics, but such strategies were futile on a force that was endlessly large. A sniper team of four where fighting in a vain attempt from keeping the Flood horde from overwhelming them, but their cover on the balcony was become ropery as it took the brunt of enemy fire. Bits of slag and concrete splattered and shattered onto the marble floors beneath.

Vadam motioned for his Elites to fan out and create an interlocking field of fire. The air soon crackled and hiss with ozone as bolts of savage energy boiled away at the diseased flesh. Most of the parasitic ranks were composed of assimilated asari, whom used their biotic abilities to their fullest extent.

Biotic tendrils lashed out from the see of pale sickly green and struck the Elites. The majestic aliens stumbled under the brunt of the impact but where by no means fazed. They moved into a pincer formation to cut of the Flood's mobility and concentrate in a singular position.

With his energy sword glowing a violet blue, Thel roared and barrelled across the water features. Droplets of water danced from the surface and splashed onto the super dense blade, crackling and hissing as the heat boiled the liquid away. Under the setting sun, the Arbiter slammed into the leading combat form.

The former asari disintegrated under the heel of his boot, oozing a revolting green fluid. Thel spun round and slashed his blade across the upper section of another combat form. The feminine finger was bisected in a clean fashion, with her wounds having been cauterised by the superheated weapon. Vadam watched in grim satisfaction as the body fell and crumble apart.

He turned his gaze westward, and there it was, the Temple of Athame. It was the sole reason why the Coalition Fleet had devoted so much into ground defences. Otherwise, Thessia would've been evacuated and purged.

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****A/N:** Anyone here attends or attended Harker Academy in San Jose?******

******Anyway, I'm now 18, and that means I can finally go out and get hammered! YAY! Goodbye everybody, and hello virgin chocolate martini!â€|******

******Pfffft, I kid, I kid.******

******I'm not going to have a virgin chocolate martini. I'm going to have a CHOCOLATE MARTINI! Hahahaha. Pfffft. Not even. I'll just have a chocolate milkshake******

â€|

**If anyone has any questions, feel free to ask. I'll try my best to answer them. Andrithir's notes are very concise and detailed.******

**If you're wondering about rewrites, his notebook already has full drafts waiting to be typed up and instructions on new conventions he wishes to implement. Rewrites are all in his own words******

59. Sinking Ark

****A/N:****

******As of September 27****th**** 2013 I am now an Old Boy. That's right; I've finished my formal education. All that is left are the finals.******

******I was told by Arec that the Chapter Secrets of Athame could be broke up into additional segments. So here is Sinking Ark.******

******May have a few hiccups because it hasn't been fully beta'ed. I haven't had the time to check through thoroughly because my finals are less than fifty hours away, and I wanted to get this story out of the way and out of my mind as I prepare the one session of exams which will forever determine my life!â€|******

****XXxxXX****

"_You may hate him, curse the very ground he treads upon. But the moment he stands by your side and fires his rifle, the moment he drags you into safety, he is your brother. He is your brother to end and beyond."

>**_****-Field Marshal General James R. Kensington (UNSC Army)****_**

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******ABOARD UNSC ****_****NIGHT HORSE****_****, IN ORBIT OF THE CITADEL II******

"As you all know, the Flood is making a determined assault on Thessia," Essingdon began. "SkySentry has also reported massive Reaper movements towards the Asari homeworld as well. We have sent Force Recon to assess and assist the Sangheili with the situation."

"_General, our forces are already spread far too thinâ€|" _Admiral Cutter argued over VIDCOM.

Keyes cut him off. "The Flood want something on Thessia. Strike patterns indicateâ€|"

"_How can the Flood have a discernible pattern?"_

"Fleet formation, amongst other things. The Elites and Force Recon have identified a high value target. The Temple of Athame."

"_What makes this building so special?"_ Admiral Lasky asked.

"We've detected _foreign_ power sources in the subterranean levels; these power signatures do not match those on Thessia. They match Forerunner."

Essingdon turned to face one his oldest friends, and pulled up schematic scans onto the display.

"Just came in from our ARG Teams."

It was a Flood form, no doubt. But it was amalgamated with semi-organic looking tech. Unlike many other forms, this one seemed _perfect_, sleek and powerful. Its flesh was pale but not sickly and protected by a thick, seamless carapace. The limbs were perfectly even. In Keyes's opinion it looked like a cross between a scarab and a jelly fish.

"This is what we're going to be up against. This is the new Ranged Combat form. Six tentacles with pincers strong enough to cut through a few layers of sheet metal, and bionic guns on its head â€" a nightmare of honed perfection. They move a lot faster too and are extremely difficult to hit. Additional forms are similar in appearance but specialise in other fields."

The room was deathly quiet; the war had just turned for the worst.

"We'll have CAS on standby, let's make this quick.
Dismissed."

Slowly, the Officers in the room stood up and left the hall. Turning to face the Chief, Keyes subtly gestured for the Spartan-II to remain behind. Waiting for everyone leave, the General did not miss the meaningful gaze Shepard and John shared before the former left. Keyes couldn't blame them; he rarely brought good news people these days. Then again he rarely brought any good news to begin with.

"I'll keep this brief," Essingdon began quietly. "I'm going to need you to accompany me on some _errands_."

Sensing the gravity of the situation, the Spartan offered no protest.

"I understand, sir."

"Fhajad will ride shotgun with Shepard."

Understandably out of all the Spartan-IIs, Fhadjad's analytical and scientific prowess was unmatched. No doubt he would be the scientist on ground to research the Temple of Athame.

"Head to bay-four, a Greyhawk will take us to our location. I'll need to get one more person."

"Sir," John saluted before leaving.

Scooping up his datapad, Keyes left the hall through the rear exits and navigated through the hallways of his ship and descended to the lower levels where the Spartan-IVs were billeted.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**MAJESTIC**_**, IN ORBIT OF THE CITADEL II****

Riley had found her, the one who had supposedly fired the bullet that killed Adrian. Captain Lori Anders â€" nicknamed by her squad as Coriander â€" had an impressive military history. Originally born on Elysian Fields, into a wealthy family, her parents were the good sort. They raised her well, taught her and guided her to be modest and kind, firm and unyielding. She had the traits of a born leader, and the marks of war to prove it. She could've gone on to become a lawyer, maybe a politician and in a stretch; an actress and a model.

But she chose a different path. No one, not even her family would've ever imagined her becoming a Supersoldier let alone Force Recon. Yet she did it, she became a Marine and climbed through its unique Special Forces hierarchy until becoming an ODST and working her way into the infamous 105th. With such exemplary performance it was without a doubt she would become a Spartan-IV.

He couldn't imagine her being able to kill a fellow comrade, not with the psychological profile he gathered. Papers and documents could be wrong however, no other form of evaluation was better than a bit of a spar.

The gym was like any other in the UNSC, except for the fact that many of those working out were Spartans. All non-Spartan personnel were medical staff, monitoring the Supersoldiers' performances. There were unspoken rules in every gym across the UNSC, many varied. But when it was populated by Spartans there was two rules; do not ogle each other and focus.

Walking along the edges of the ring, Riley instinctively catalogued every piece of equipment sitting on the dark carpet. Anders was running a fresh Spartan-IV team through some drills. Where Crimson-One was, he didn't know, not that it mattered. She had her dark strawberry blonde hair tied into a pony tail, and wore standard PT gear; form fitting singlets and shorts.

"Sally, he's bigger than you, use your weight against him," Anders instructed.

Riley hovered closer to the ring and watched the spectacle unfold. He wasn't the only one; there were the twins â€" Blaze and Viper â€" and Alec. Normally Saps would be in his workshop, he never had off days,

the engineer's obsession with modifying weapons was borderline clinical.

"Hey Sandy," Alec greeted.

"Saps," Riley nodded. "Whatcha doin' here?"

"Watching the show," Alec shrugged. "Making sure the twins don't get into any trouble."

"Good luck," Riley scoffed, leaning against the ring barrier.

"Hey, we resent that," Blaze said. "Right Vinsahn?"

Viper's eyes focused on the way how the green Spartan-IVs moved. They were fast, but they lacked individuality or style. It made them unbelievably easy to predict.

"Uh, Vinnie?" Blaze waved his hand in front of his brother's face. "You there?"

"Yes."

"Watcha looking at?"

Vincent gestured to the sparring group and their trainer.

"A boring yet enthralling bunch," he sighed. "Go figure."

"They're running drillsâ€¦ it supposed to be like that."

"Rightâ€¦ knew thatâ€¦ duh," Vincent breathed. "Dayumâ€¦"

"â€¦she fine!" Blake finished, though lacking his brother's enthusiasm.

All eyes concentrated on Anders as she provided another example of arrastÃ£o, a classic leg takedown. The simple drive as Anders pushed her opponent backwards sending his face into the ground followed by a guillotine choke made Riley winceâ€¦ along with the rest of the Spartan IV cohort.

"Ouchâ€¦" Vincent cringed.

"That looks nasty," Blake added.

Anders hauled the Spartan-IV up from the mat and sent him back to the rest of the class. Turning around, she spotted the _observation_group.

"You boys see something you like?"

"Oh yes, darling," Vincent smirked, and then looked at his cohort whom were giving him the death glare. "Not too sure about this bunch though."

Alec and Riley, having found a seat further away from the ring, brought a hand to their eyes, cringing at their grim forecast.

"They're screwed."

Lori sauntered up to the edge of the mat to the twins with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Would you like an even closer look?" She winked back. The smile remained on her face.

Viper looked to Riley as if for approval. Sanders gave a soft smile, beckoning them to go.

"Have fun, but try not to hurt her too much" he goaded. He quickly turned to Alec and whispered in a low voice. "Ten says she takes them out without getting knocked."

"I say they land a few punches before she takes them out," Alec whispered back.

The Engineer fished into his pocket and pulled out a pipe, poured a lime flavoured compound and inhaled the soothing aroma.

"This is going to end badly," Riley muttered.

"Why ye of so little faith in your own, Sandy?" Lori teased.

Ignoring her jibe at their boss, the twins continued to change into appropriate sparring attire before entering the ring. Vaulting over the barriers, the two landed softly onto the mat, and gave a curt bow.

Assuming their respective stances, their faces relaxed into neutral expressions.

"Hey Coriander hope you're ready to be vlazed!" Viper said.

"Vlazed?" Anders arched an eyebrow, unimpressed and slightly perplexed.

"It's a combination of the names of my brother and I, it's a term used to describe-" Viper began.

"Vee shut up." Blaze whispered through clenched teeth.

"What?" Viper looked at his brother.

"If you explain the reason you just sound stupid!" Blaze whispered.

"Whenever you're ready, boys," Corriander said.

The twins sidestepped, charging her from different directions. She countered by rushing towards Viper first, knocking the dual attack of balance. Ducking low and following through with a perfectly executed leg sweep, Viper found himself hitting the mat.

Blaze readjusted, held both fists close to his chest and coiled in his legs. Anders levelled herself to face on the Operative. Springing forward, his entire driving force behind the two fists was enough to

hurl Lori into the air. She had blocked the two fists, but couldn't glance them off and thus had to bore the brunt on her forearms.

The Operative followed on through with two knee strikes and rapid punches centre mass. He knew she liked to utilise Capoeira and Northern Shaolin techniques. Both forms relied on sweeping acrobatic attacks. In order to remove that strong point, he had to move in close and suppress.

Thumps echoed across the ring as his fists rammed into her forearms. She was turtling up, but he still kept the pressure on. Viper quickly moved in and took up the slack, but they could've never anticipated what her counter move was.

Anders quickly bent backwards and kicked up. Her foot clipped Viper at his chin, knocking him out cold. Executing a perfect back-walk flip, she had put enough distance between her and Blaze.

"Damn," he muttered.

Lori flashed a brilliant smile, and charged forward. Moving in low, she used her roundhouse kicks to devastating effects. Blaze couldn't react fast enough to dodge or counter. Two hits the rib cage and he was begging to wheeze.

Both sides backed off and allowed a brief moment to rethink tactics. Blaze made the first move. High attacks, using his training to full effect; he used his body as a missile. He lunged at her, legs forward. He scored a few hits on her bare midriff. But she had been far enough from his point of launch to avoid the worst of the attack.

Blaze made another attempt; he sprinted and leapt into the air, drawing back a fist. But he had timed it wrong. Lori sidestepped and the fists missed her. The Operative had committed too much, she had caught him flat footed.

Utilising the full forward momentum of her body, Lori locked Blaze's neck between her knees and pulled her centre of mass down. Blaze was hurled like a ragdoll across the ring, coming to a halt when he hit the barrier.

"That was good," Lori breathed, sheen of sweat forming at her forehead. "Sandy? Wanna go?"

Riley nodded. He changed into his PT gear and entered the ring by the time the twins had taken their seats in the stands.

"She's good," Vincent said with a pained nod.

"So a woman nearly taking off your head is what it takes for you to compliment her?" Blaze asked.

Vincent shrugged. But Riley ignored them.

Standing near the centre, he gave a curt nod and assumed his stance.

Lori's moves had a preference to striking from a distance. Adrian's style was flexible but he preferred to get in close and make full use

of faster and shorter bursts. Maybe Riley would have to follow suit.

"Whenever you're ready, Sandy."

Riley charged, but Anders stood her ground. He opened with two round house punches to the head. Lori ducked. That was just the opening he was looking for. Pushing on both legs, he brought his knee up, and collided with her retreating chest.

Feeling the full hit on her sternum, Anders wheezed and stepped back. Riley moved in with a flurry of punches and then with one of Adrian's signature moves. Sanders struck forward with his right elbow, then the left, he spun on the heel of his foot and attacked with the back of his right arm and followed through with a powerful knee combo.

Lori managed to protect her head, but left her torso bare. She nearly doubled over but managed to right herself before her weakness could be further exploited. Quickly stepping back a few paces, she managed to get some distance between her and Riley. It was all she needed.

It was what Riley had anticipated. He had learned enough from her style. Her moves lacked the raw brutality he would expect from a person willing to carry out wetworks " or maybe she was just a good actor. It didn't matter.

She sprung on him, airborne and legs extended. Two heels crashed into his chest and a fist across his jaw. Half a second later, she had him in a guillotine headlock. All of his arms were locked and his body pinned.

"GG," the twins bellowed from sidelines.

With a deft flick of his wrist he tapped out.

"Good show," Riley said respectfully.

"Thanks."

He held out a hand. It was a firm shake, but as he expected, it lacked any raw brutality. He'd have to tell Keyes about this later. Walking back up the stands where Alec was, Riley grabbed his gear and prepared to go to the showers.

"What?" he asked, noticing Saps questioning look.

"Nothin' mate. Anything hurt? Your ego?" Alec teased.

"Shut up, man."

From the other side of the room, a door opened. Usually that wouldn't register on Sanders's radar, but it was at that very moment all activities just seemed to cease.

"Captain Anders, report to bay-four on _Night Horse_," Keyes ordered.

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****UNSC NIGHTWALKER****

The ship, its crew had died a few months ago, and yet it felt so old within. But there was a sense of home to it; Keyes could feel it as he roamed the quiet halls. With the development of more autonomous systems, ONI Prowlers could easily be crewed by one man, though it was against regulations.

Exceptions could be made however for the only soul residing within the hulls.

A man with neatly combed hair and unnaturally blue eyes sat by the viewport, his hands gently cradling a journal. With pianist fingers, he gently picked up the photo of a beautiful brown haired woman.

Keyes knew her personally too; she had been in his science class at university. Doctor Delilah Orton was a very close friend of Adrian's. Close enough to be the only outsider to know that Anthony and Adrian were one in the same man.

He looked like hell. There were bags under his sleepless blue eyes. His bronze tinted skin was sickly pale and marred with scars. The operation to graft him new organs extremely taxing on him. He should've been in bed and recovering. But Keyes knew it was pointless to reprimand him.

"Donnie," he greeted, flexing his bionic arm. "How's everyone doing?"

Essingdon walked across the lower deck, and climbed up the steps onto the mezzanine. He sat down in the seat

"This is a dangerous game you're playing," Keyes said.

"Why are you even defending that bitch?" Adrian growled.

"I'm not!" Keyes argued. "I just think you're going too far. When are you going draw the line, huh?"

Essingdon paused, and held his fingers to his chin as he tilted his head. His friend didn't sound as articulate as usual. Chen sounded disjointed, clouded and unfocused.

"He meant a lot to us, but Adrian, look at what you're doing. Everyone thinks you're dead."

"Good, let them think that."

"But your family!" Keyes argued.

It was so unlike him to lose it like that. But Adrian was the only person left out of a rapidly shrinking circle of friends.

"It's been a long time," Adrian laughed dryly.

Keyes sighed and leaned back in his seat.

"So why did you want me here?"

A triumphant smile crossed the Operative's face.

"I've found Bravo-Kilo, AKA Kilo-Five."

Essingdon raised an eyebrow. They had finally got a lead on Osman's personal bloodhounds.

"Where are they?"

"Lesser Arkâ€|"

Adrian had tracked them down through cross referencing credit card accounts, purchase patterns and a sea of CCTV, as well as other less ethical methods. But this was what he was trained for, hunting and killing. He had hunted them down, filtered out factors and added in others.

"Feel like tagging along? Just like old times?"

"Just like old times," he nodded. "I'll bring in the others."

â€|

Essingdon was never going to admit it, but he loved to wear suits. There was no shame in saying that one loved to wear such article of clothing, but it was a bit redundant after having been shot at repeatedly. Having lived a portion of his life as an Intelligence Officer, it was a taboo to say anything about preferences.

For the Op, Adrian had purchased a myriad of clothing and makeup to help disguise the Operatives. Anders had emerald green eye contacts, and dyed her hair mahogany red. Keyes dyed his into a rich dark brown just like Adrian had so they could both compliment their sapphire blue eyes. As for John, they kept his appearance the same simply because not that many people knew who he was out of the armour.

They were going to play this one by ear, with a rough plan in mind. Not exactly the greatest way to approach a sensitive Operation; but ONISAD was trained as a _fire and forget_ force. Making plans that were able to change as the mission parameters shifted was their speciality.

"Here's how we'll play it," Adrian said. "Lori, you're with me, we're going in on the ground. John, you're our QRF. Things go south, you come in guns blazing. Don, you'll be our ears and listen in on their COM traffic."

Keyes was head of the most powerful intelligence organisation currently in existence, they couldn't risk exposing him unless absolutely necessary. The ramifications would be tremendous to say the least if something went wrong. He wasn't supposed to work in the field anymore, but this was personal. The people he was after were the ones that had killed his friends. There was an irony in it all; he had stated that if any personnel were emotionally compromised, they would be rotated through. Yet, here he and Adrian were, out on a revenge mission. There was no one suitable for this mission who wasn't emotionally compromised. â€" save for Anders. Anna still wanted Osman's and Parangosky's head.

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****LESSER ARK****

Lesser Ark in reality was not that much smaller than the Greater Ark, especially after expansion projects to support a larger population. The GA was mainly for bureaucratic, political and joint military ventures, whereas the LA had more of the commercial industries. Regardless, the Coalition had meticulously planned out for each Installation to be self-sufficient in the event that the ruling body collapse for some unknown reason.

GA was designed with a uniformed theme by a renowned team of architects and artists. LA was left up to free will and was a brilliant clash of colours and commercial industry. This was what ONISAD Operatives thrived in, a sea of grinding bodies ignorant to the assassin's that lurked within.

Keyes gently guided the car through the highway, making idle conversation as they approached the city of New Paris.

"Palmer's pretty upset," Essingdon said nonchalantly.

"Really?" Adrian asked, though he sounded like he couldn't care any less.

"Were you two close?"

Chen sent Keyes a questioning look.

"What? You two spend a lot of time talking."

"Platonic? Yes," Adrian answered without missing a beat.

Keyes accepted it as the truth, from the Intelligence Officer's end of course.

"Women do have a thing for mysterious and broken men as well as bad boys."

"She knows exactly what I doâ€¦| you're argument is invalid," Adrian deadpanned, resting his elbow on the seat rest.

"You know Riley punched her."

Adrian gave a dry chuckle. "I was wondering when he would get 'round to that."

Donnie ignored the commentâ€¦| and the pun.

"It had to do something with Palmer being in bed with Bravo-Kilo."

"Can I just point out the irony in them calling themselves Bravo-Kilo after supply Elite splinter factions with weapons?"

"Well you and I both know she used to be with Osman until Haverson came along."

It was no secret that the men knew how Palmer became a senior officer in SPARTAN Branch. She was loyal, morally guided on black and white, and that made her easy to manipulate. The two were fully aware of what kind of missions Sarah had conducted that earned her candidacy for Spartan-IV.

"Funny how you used to hate her," Keyes said, steering the car off onto an exit.

"Never said I hated her," Adrian countered, his eyes flickering across the car's HUD.

"You showed it enoughâ€¦ word has it that you and Riley met her on Okinawa."

Adrian gave a brief snort. He had fought beside Sarah before; she had brought in her ODSs to pull him and his team out. He was grateful for that, but that didn't mean she earned a friendship ticket.

Anders gave a light scoff. "Everyone outside of Spartan either hates her or fears her."

Like her CO, Captain Lori Anders had her fair share of run ins with ONISAD, but usually it was to pull out an Arcani or ARG team.

"What about the people inside?" Keyes asked.

"Indifferent," the Captain shrugged.

A brief pause settled upon them before Donnie changed the topic.

"Be honest with me, why did you defend my mother so much. Why did you stand up against Osman, for her? It would've been easier on you if you hadn't."

It was true; life for Adrian would've been so much easier if he had just stayed away from Halsey. Parangosky and Osman wouldn't have sent him and his teams on deployments that threatened their sanity and questioned their loyalty. Keyes knew from the files that half of those missions were unsanctioned and unnecessary.

"I knew what kind of position she was in," Adrian shrugged. "Just didn't feel right to let her burn, wrongly accused."

There was a brief pause.

"Thanks Adrian, I owe you oneâ€¦ more than one."

"You remember graduation day?" Chen asked.

Keyes nodded.

"Remember what David said? We're privileged to have the life we had, and the responsibility to guide those less fortunate than we are."

"Might've been a privilege back thenâ€¦ now I'm not so sure," Essingdon agreed.

"Power corruptsâ€¦ it's just the corruption is not always conventional."

Adrian reached into the holster under his arm and gripped his sidearm for pre-mission checks. The Fulton & Rasch FR79 pistols were among the more unique weapons in the UNSC's arsenal. Preferred by ONISAD and Force Recon the DEW sidearm was capable of firing low velocity hard-light rounds to subdue targets quickly. It was perfect for urban environments because of minimal collateral damage.

"Weapons are good," Keyes said. "Fresh from the assembly line."

They were dressed in business suits, styled to suit formal and semi-formal occasions as well as parties.

"Okay, we'll drop you off here, good luck," Keyes said. "John's circling around the district. Hit the panic button, and he'll pull you out."

Stepping out of the car, they let their eyes pan across the expensive boulevard. Places like these weren't that great in terms of money efficiency. It was only for the reputation that people went here to buy excessively expensive items, or to go to the entertainment venues. Places like these were for those who loved to live a decadent life. Nightclubs were a front for drugs, and massage parlours were just a cover for prostitution.

"We're attracting unwanted attention," Keyes warned.

"We're going, we're going," Adrian said, raising his hands just about his shoulders.

Lori found it such a stark change in attitude. In the car, his face was grim and his eyes were dull. But now, he looked brighter and happier, though it was just all an act.

"Let's go," Chen gestured as Keyes merged back onto the avenue.

Anders followed the Operative's lead. A number of times she had to shift to avoid drunks or walk around men sending her lustful looks despite her being an intimidating foot taller than most of them.

"Flirt back," Adrian whispered.

"What?" she stared back at him.

"Make eye contact or wink," he said.

Lori sent him a questioning look.

"Not drawing attention to yourself is drawing attention to yourself."

That made sense in a twisted way. Being too quiet was a bad thing. She decided to follow his unorthodox advice, and couldn't help but feel the need to take a shower.

"Stay close," he said.

He had already given her the briefing; this area was run by Bastrite Contracts " or what was left of the company when its assets were frozen. On the surface, Wutherfordfield looked like a nice place for holidaying couples. But beneath, it was one of the worst hell holes in a blue zone. Private security in the area could definitely give ONI a run for its money and most of the city cops were bought off. Even Coalition Investigation Bureau was weary of the area.

"_I've tapped into local COMs, some of the guards are looking your way,"_ Keyes channelled.

"What do you think of this?" Adrian asked in a cheery tone.

His hand gently but firmly placed on Lori's back and guided her towards a jewellery display cabinet, gesturing at a hideously overpriced but beautiful diamond necklace.

"The chain is not my style," she answered.

"_They're waving off, but keep an eye out. You're cleared to move."_

Walking along the pavement, Adrian specifically picked a group to walk behind. People of their stature were easy to pick out in a crowd, but with the right clothing, mannerisms and movement patterns, they could move without being detected.

There were hundreds of business conglomerates that were not based out of Coalition held space. Many of the businesses here were fronts for drug cartels and crime syndicates, all of them would harbour some sort of hatred towards the UNSC. They operated by an archaic code of honour, that demanded revenge. Some were even cult driven.

Finding help against the Coalition here wouldn't be that difficult. Adrian's hunch was that Bravo-Kilo was out looking for allies. And they would have not only information, but information leverage. Keyes had tasked Anna Greenfield to restructure and organise operations outside of Coalition held space to reduce leaks and compromises. Though information in the intelligence world had a _use by date_, they could still do damage in the wrong hands.

Adrian and Lori took a left down the road and walked along the waterside front towards the Casino. The populace was out and about, thriving on an infinite lifespan and an abundance of wealth. Though a large portion of UNSC Forces had been deployed, it hadn't been declared as a state of emergency. Memories from earlier wars were still fresh, and declaring such an action would cause civil unrest. People needed to live in their bubble, regardless of how desperate the current war was going.

Climbing the marble staircase, lined with water features and sculptures, the main glass doors parted and allowed them to enter the carpeted foyer, where a large desk awaited for clientele to check in to their rooms and to the right was a staircase leading up to the main area. Entering the atrium, Anders let her eye pan across the massive dining area, complete with an open dance floor and bar. An expansive platform stretched out over the waterside, extending the dining area.

It looked beautiful, calm and serene. But underneath, she knew its true nature. The family friendly atmosphere was just a front for human and narcotics trafficking.

"We need to find and override security," Adrian whispered. "No lethal force unless necessary."

"_Just a heads up people, security is onto you,"_ Keyes channelled.

"We'll grab a bite first."

â€|

It didn't feel right to leave her. Shepard was going to take part in a pivotal battle against the new generation of Flood forms on Thessia while John was regulated to HVT hunting. He knew that at some point Bravo-Kilo would have to answer for their crimes, but now wasn't the time. But If Adrian or Keyes believed that this was would help the war effort, then John would trust their judgement.

Calmly, he steered the SUV down an avenue, populated with fine restaurants and lounges. He needed to be careful. He was the group's panic button. Should something go south, he'd go in all guns blazing.

It was why he was wearing a MkIV Urban Incursion's Combat Suit, reminiscent of twenty-first century combat gear; it only had a vest, armour hood, joint pads and shin guards. UICS4 was meant for speed, flexibility and stealth. It allowed casual clothes to be worn underneath or over the top to ward of suspicion.

Making sure that his 4-Focal Goggles were attached to his helmet, he kept an eye on incoming information through the car's recon systems. Information was powerful indeed; he could filter who had committed what felonies or what their past infractions with the law were. Most were minor such as DUI or domestic disturbances. No one worth noting, all problems below the Spartan's pay grade.

â€|

****LESSER ARK, WUTHERFIELD CASINO, MAIN DINING AREA****

"Enjoying your sushi?" Adrian asked in a faux cheery tone.

He pulled it off so seamlessly and flawlessly. Lori nodded as she picked up another roll wither chopsticks and dipped it into the soy sauce. Adrian sat down beside her and placed a bowl of Dutch Chocolate ice cream onto the table top.

"_Monitoring chatter,"_ Keyes said over the encrypted COM channel. "_Guards are looking your way. Nothing big but they're getting suspicious."_

Slowly, Adrian shifted his gaze across the harbour and did a light gesture with his spoon.

A signal.

"Think fast!" Anders chirped.

He whipped his head round just in time to see the salty onyx liquid cascade onto ice cream. Adrian looked at her, eyes wide.

"Why'd you do that?" he gapped.

Lori grinned.

"It was just two drops," she said sweetly.

"Two drops?" Adrian exasperated. "It's a bloody sushi soy sauce lagoon."

"Oh you idiot baby, here."

Reaching over, she took the spoon out of his hands and scooped up the ruined ice cream. But before she could empty the spoon over a plate, Adrian swooped in. His shoulders tensed, and eyes shot open. She placed a hand over her mouth as she saw him recoil in horror as the sensation overwhelmed him in ways most foul. Forcing it down, he leaned back into his chair, the blood seemingly drained from his face. He continued to blink and shake his head slightly, oblivious to Lori's shocked expression.

"That was horrible," he groaned, his voice barely above a whisper.

"You silly child, why did you do that?" Lori chided. "Ever heard of letting go."

"Hate to see good Dutch Chocolate go to waste," Adrian coughed.

"No words," she said, shaking her head. "No words."

"_That did it," _Keyes channelled. _"Guards are waving off."_

"You know, I'm going to sit somewhere else where you can't violate my ice cream."

"Excuse me?" Lori gave her best _who-me _expression. "But I'm improving your image by sitting next to you."

"Ouch," Adrian sighed, rearing rooted to his chair.

"I thought so."

"I'll get you back for this."

"Whatever," Lori smirked.

"Done?"

Anders nodded.

"Let's go," Adrian gestured.

Playing the part of a gentlemanly companion, he pulled Lori's seat back with infinite care before helping her put on her jacket.

"Ass," she chuckled.

"Excuse me?" Adrian gave his best_ 'who me?'_ expression.

Walking away from their table, he gave the cashier a generous tip before ushering Anders towards the stairs. The two switched through spectrum filters on their ARs and slowly made their way around the patrons. It was absolutely crucial that they did not follow a linear path, but they still had to remain together because they had entered as simultaneously. They could've gone in at different times, but security would be watching them like a hawk. According to recent trends, lone personnel were of higher risk.

Having scouted out the Casino before, Adrian led Lori through the main walkway which ran parallel to the plaza, the noise of dining families and friends began to soften as they climbed the stairs to the upper floors. Their target was in the pier wing, or the glass dome overhang above the seaside. Despite the beautiful scenery, the atmosphere made Lori's skin crawl.

Upon reaching the next level, the atmosphere suddenly shifted. First floor had an air of general casualness and a nice place for large groups to dine a bit decadently. The dÃ©cor mirrored that with its auburn-orange walls, medium intensity lights and musical performances on the stage. But here, the interior design echoed formality and class.

Keeping an eye of the venue's blueprints, Anders noticed that there were plenty of sound barriers both passive and active installed. Especially closer to the more _exclusive_ clientele area, none of the girls here were androids. Most of them were runaways or smuggled in from areas outside the green and blue zones.

"Let's make this quick," Chen breathed.

A ghost op is a good op.

Contrary to popular belief, ONISAD preferred to use minimal force. They only killed when it was absolutely necessary, and the only time when they massacre an entire base â€" was if it was part of the mission objective. Even then, they'd be able to do it with the least amount of shots fired.

Due to the nature of the casino, the more exclusive areas had no cameras whatsoever, only sensors. No client would want his or her face recorded in these areas. Security here was handled by armed guards.

Passing by an air vent leading straight into a relay node, Adrian discreetly deployed a drone before moving off towards the pier.

"Drone deployed," he whispered into his throat mic.

"_Copy, Commandeering,"_ Keyes acknowledged.

Turning to Lori, Adrian gave a short nod. "We're good to head home."

"_Not yet, we've got our man. Beloi is on the fourth floor, probably to the carpark. See if you can cut him off."_

"Dammit," Adrian muttered.

"_I'm heading to the south entrance; Chief's going to swing around the block."_

Without attracting as much attention as possible, Adrian and Lori quickly backtracked to the elevators and descended to the lower levels.

Essingdon was already waiting for them. The two quickly got into the vehicle, and drove off. Keyes switched the car over to autopilot, allowing him, Lori and Adrian to change their outfit. Removing their suit jackets, they replaced their coats with a bullet proof vest, complete with Law Enforcement markings. To increase authentication of their looks, both retired their ties, as well as folding up their sleeves.

"This is going to be one fucking incident," Keyes muttered, retaking control of the vehicle.

"Flick on the sirens," Adrian said.

That was the beauty of ONI unmarked cars, nanocarbon fibres allowed them to assume whatever colour scheme required. At the push of the button, the carbon black livery was replaced by black on grey – the colour scheme of Coalition Federal Police. With sirens blaring, Keyes floored the pedal and weaved the sedan in and out of traffic lanes.

Reaching around the back, Adrian pulled out an M7SCA7 submachine gun. Exclusive to Special Forces, the A7 has integral suppressor unit and tactical railings for additional modifications. The one he had taken for the op was optimised for accuracy and manoeuvrability.

"Move into the right lane," the Operative gestured.

Keyes complied. "You're going to take the shot?"

Adrian nodded. "Lori, give me a hand."

The Spartan-IV complied as she levelled her SMG and rolled down the windows. Keyes gunned the engines and shot past a half dozen cars to catch up to Beloi. Lori stuffed her doubts away into the back of her mind. This was in a metropolitan area, an urban environment. A stray shot could potentially be fatal. But these men were going all or nothing.

"_I'm moving down the freeway to cut him off,"_ John said, his car's sirens could be heard in the background.

Flickering her eyes over to the GPS map, Anders could see that they were inbound for a large shopping complex for tourist, Jewel Plaza. Air brushed against her hair as Essingdon swerved unnervingly close to some cars.

The vehicles whipped down the road, sped over a plateau and soared down the hill before landing with a resounding screech. Keyes drifted the car around the bend and caught up with Beloi while narrowly avoiding a supply truck.

"Shit that was close," he muttered.

Lori felt like she was in a mad house ride, one man was driving the car in a way that would put most movies to shame, while the other kept his weapon trained on the objective with sheer determination.

"Okay, clean stretch!" Keyes barked. "Take the shot."

At the squeeze of a trigger, dozens of rounds were spat within seconds. Sparks exploded across Beloi's SUV as the incendiary rounds ate away at the hull. But it wasn't enough.

"Get me Grim," Adrian gestured to a metal suitcase in the car.

Anders quickly opened the lock and passed the Operative his favourite customised weapon. With a few quick switches and slight adjustments, Lori watched with fascination as he slid a magazine with cartridges the size of his thumb into the receiver.

Just like she expected, he leaned out of the window again, his head narrowly missing a bus. Beloi had taken a last ditch attempt to hide out in nightlife traffic, and drive up an overpass. She could see the people standing, watching in shock and disbelief at the scene that unfolded before them.

Turning onto another lane, Keyes managed to position Adrian in the perfect firing position. Without hesitation, a trio of loud thumps echoed across the street, sending people screaming and diving for cover. The Raufoss rounds punched through the rear left side of the car and ripped out the wheel, showering the road with sparks and debris. Nano-Carbon fibres couldn't do much to keep stability if it wasn't on the car.

Beloi's SUV veered dangerously to the right into the direction of a boulevard before lurching violently to the left. It grated across the road, through the oncoming traffic and smashed into the retaining wall. The sheer inertia off the SUV was more than enough to overcome the barrier. It crashed and barrel rolled over onto the parking lot below, crushing a number of vehicles in its path.

"Stop here."

Slamming the brakes, the car screeched to a halt. Adrian and Lori quickly got out and leapt to the safety of the walkway. Pistols drawn, they approached the gaping hole in the barrier as Keyes drove around the block to get onto the on-ramp, situated upon an incline to lead directly onto the top floor of the parking lot.

"Drops not too far down," Lori said.

She estimated the drop would be no more than five meters, and jumped. Her entire weight came crashing down on a sedan, blowing out the windows. She gracefully rolled and landed upright onto the concrete decking and slowly advanced, waiting for Adrian's go. A half second later, the car next to her was dealt with a similar fate as its roof caved in.

Shoppers looked on with surprise unable to comprehend if the two events they had witnessed were related or maybe this was their first time meeting actual Supersoldiers. Whatever the cause for their dumbfounded expressions, they were at risk.

"Get out of here now!" Adrian barked, flashing a Coalition Investigation Bureau Badge.

Lori kept on a direct line of course to the overturned SUV, shattered glass crunching beneath her shoes, while Adrian egressed to the right where the balcony overlooked the streets below. Conveniently for the driver, it had managed to roll into the entrance of the shopping complex.

"Hold up," Adrian said, taking cover behind a van. Anders followed suit. "Something isâ€¦"

It felt like an iron wall slamming into her, knocking all the air out of her body. The world slowed to a crawl as she saw parked vehicles being picked up like toys and hurled sky high. Feeling metal twist and glass shatter behind her back, Lori felt darkness embrace her.

A few seconds later she came to, and found herself looking in horror at the fire column towering over her. Ember streaks rained from the sky and burned everything it touched, setting fire to the cars and the grounds.

Adrian!

She rolled off the bonnet, feeling fire sting across her shoulder and back. Her jacket was set alight but she had barely anytime to notice it as she rushed to where she last saw the Operative. She saw a section of the barriers having been ripped out, possibly by another vehicle. It didn't matter, nor did it make much sense. But there was Adrian, hanging on for dear life.

The ember streaks splashed onto him, grazing past his head, pouring onto his shoulders and uncovered forearms. She could hear his pained screams as he used his left hand to snuff out the flame.

"Hang on!" she cried.

Flesh seemed to melt off his left arm, revealing the bionic limb that ran beneath. He was withering in pain, teeth clenched, and eyes wide in horror. Smart-cloth clothing was designed to stop ballistics, not incendiary compounds of this magnitude.

The fingers on his right hand began to uncurl; he began to slip over the ledge. He desperately tried to claw the concrete with his left arm, but it was no use, his grip waned and he slipped.

Now or never!

Lori divided, arms outstretched. Her hand wrapped around his raw right arm, while her other hand locked into a jutting van axel. She grunted in pain as her back burned even further, but she pushed on.

Looking onto the streets below, she could see it littered with wrecked cars from the parking lot, burning debris and civilians

desperately trying to find protection from the dirty bomb's fallout. Her eyes locked onto Adrian's face, nearly drained of consciousness. His hair was practically burned off and angry streaks ran down the length of his face.

To her horror, the skin on his forearm began to peel. Tightening her grip, Anders dug into his muscle, eliciting a pained cry. His bionic arm latched onto her hand, and with all her strength, she pulled him to safety.

His eyes were dazed; his body was going into shock. The clothes he wore were now just burnt shreds. Quickly she pulled him to his feet and led him to the section under the overhang.

"_Lori, Adrian, respond!_" it was Keyes. "_I'm moving to you now!_"

"No!" Adrian roared voice hoarse. "Finish the job."

There was a pause on the other end.

"_We'll get him!_"

Anders's hands were covered in skin and blood that did not belong to her. With Adrian safe, she quickly stripped off the smouldering armoured vest, followed by the suit jacket. Her hair was singed and sections of her skin were burned, but it wasn't all that bad, not when she compared her condition to Adrian. He looked just like the bodies of contractors dragged through the streets by Fundamentalists or Insurrectionists.

But he would make it. She heard he had taken a Raufoss round to the gut around the same time he had marked a target for her.

"Hey, Adrian!"

She began to pull off his armoured vest, tossing aside the useless garment and ignoring the massive smouldering holes. His grey on black dress shirt was in tatters and she did her best to remove it without tearing out more of his skin.

"Stay with me."

His eyes rolled back into his head as he slumped against the truck. Checking to see if there was a pulse, Lori pulled her fingers away from his neck and found it to be slick with blood. More began to seep out of his nose, eyes and ears. He was closest to the blast. The way he tried to clutch his chest suggested a few broken ribs and a collapsed lung.

"Adrian!"

He said something incorrigible, the horrible coughs wracking his body and spraying red.

"What is it?" Lori asked softly.

"Did we get him?" he croaked.

Lori gave a soft nod to ease his mind. For the first time since she

saw him, his face relaxed into a content expression. But soon it was placed by a puzzled one.

"What the bloody hell is that?" he pointed towards ground zero.

"Dirty bomb; chemical," Lori answered.

Her eyes focused on the wreckage and the cloud of smoke rising up from it. Somehow, it looked green. A sickly howl flowed through the air like a winter gale.

"Shit," she muttered.

Dead bodies began to wrench themselves up from the ground, their limbs bent at horrible angles. Quickly, they began to mutate. There was too many of them, human cybernetic augmentations could fight off a few of the spores but not this volume and not when the host was already dead. Those bodies were there for the taking.

"How the fuck is that possible?" she hissed.

"They only need biomass now," Adrian supplied.

She turned her sapphire blue eyes back to him. His breath was ragged; blood was seeping out of his body.

"Run!" he urged. Droplets of blood flew from his mouth as he yelled for Anders to save herself.

"Not even," Lori said, hauling him to his feet.

"No way! fuck!" he screamed.

His flesh was tender and torn, her fingers dug into his sinews of muscle.

"Sorry! Just bear with me," Anders said comfortingly.

She managed to lift him into the safety of a Warthog, closed the flaps and gunned the engines. Countless forms tried to stop her. But they were mindless, without a leader. Lori ran over them without hesitation, flicking on the windshield wipers when it began to be covered in a sickly green paste.

"Tell me where going to make it," she said to no one in particular.

"Gents," Adrian wheezed into his COM. "It's a bio attack. Get Flood containment teams in now."

"_Copy that," _Keyes answered.

Weaving down through the carpark, Anders steered the vehicle onto the streets of Wuthersfield and headed for the nearest UNSC Base.

and

Seeing the fiery plume in the night sky, John knew a dirty bomb had

gone off. He didn't know why, but it seemed to remind him of his first mission. Sam had blown through the docks to allow Blue Team to escape, and in the process dozens of civilian workers were subjected to the vacuum of space. Here however, it was different. It was a dirty bomb detonated in a place where families were out enjoying life.

"_Lori, Adrian, respond!" _Keyes broadcasted_. "I'm moving to you now!"_

"_No! Finish the job!"_

As a soldier, John understood why the mission came before everything. But there was a line; Adrian had crossed it a long time ago. He knew Chen shouldn't even be working; the Operative should've been on leave.

John steered his SUV off the highway and down onto the avenue. Slamming down onto the pedal, the vehicle shot forward, weaving in and out of traffic. He flicked on the sirens, washing the crowds with blue and red lights. The last thing they needed was for someone to call the police to further complicate the situation.

"Keyes, wave off," the Spartan broadcasted. "I got this. We can't risk exposing you."

"_Dammit, fine," _Essingdon muttered. _"Go north point-two clicks then take a left. Cut him off. Do it quick before the Containment Teams get here."_

"Copy thâ€|"

Civilian Warthogs rammed their way down the avenue and immediately formed a barricade. Traffic on the street quickly halted, causing massive pile ups. Instinctively, John threw himself behind the dashboard, just as glass rained down upon him. Bullet's tore through the bonnet, bringing his engine to a spluttering halt.

The Spartan reached for his short-barrel Grim2 and held it close to his chest. Bringing up his right leg, he bashed the driver door open before sliding out. He hugged the edges of the SUV and leaned against the tires. People were running away from the scene in a mad rush, some were still stuck in their vehicles. He wanted to help them, but he couldn't. Collateral damage was inevitable.

Chambering an Achilles Missile into the under-barrel launcher, he zeroed in on the closest Warthog and fired. A wispy plume of smoke left his hands and plunged through the windshield and detonated.

A brief flash washed over the gunmen, and soon after a cloud of smoke. Men were tossed from the safety of cover. They were exposed â€" and there would be no second chances. Aiming down the sights, John squeezed the trigger in quick succession. AP-Semi-Fragmentation rounds punched through the light body armour and ripped flesh apart. Nothing did more damage to soft targets than fragmentation rounds.

But two could play at that game. The Contractors returned fire. To the untrained eye, no one would've caught the soft violet trails after the rounds impacted. They were using rounds derived from

needlers.

Sliding in another Achilles round, he took aim at another Warthog. Metal fragments flew in all directions as the front bonnet was shredded apart, smoke billowing from the charred remains.

"Fuck, he's packing heavy!" a Contractor bellowed.

He was taking cover behind a car.

Too bad that won't help him, John thought dryly.

A quick burst was all it took to punch through the family sedan and kill the man crouching behind it. Taking the offensive, the Spartan fired another burst to suppress opposition force and advanced forward. He threw himself a van, tossed a flashbang into the air, and used the distraction to run into a store front.

Using his goggles, he plotted a route to flank the enemy. Store keepers and shoppers watched with tense anxiety as he looped through the clothing store and exited out on the other wing. He had to end this fast, there were too many civilians and both forces were packing enough firepower to level the entire shopping block.

The Spartan slid across the pavement on his knees, stabilising his momentum as he fired with unnerving accuracy. Having yet to recover from the flashbang's effects, the Contractors were nothing more than simple targets. Echoing in quick succession, the Grim spilt blood and brain matter onto the road.

Clear.

With Beloi's extraction team out of the picture, the man wasn't going to escape.

"Keyes, I need a location on Beloi," John barked into his COMs.

"_He's headed in your direction, cut him off at the northern entrance."_

John went round the block and into the entrance. Everywhere there were civilians trying to find safety within the expansive mall. Swearing inwardly, the Spartan looked around for viable approaches to the entrance. He sprinted up the escalator, rifle at the ready. He scanned the crowds with his optics. A Red outline appeared on his HUD.

Beloi.

The traitorous Spartan four sprinted through the crowd, having not realised the presence of the Chief.

Slinging his weapon onto his back, the Spartan quickly ducked into a café and positioned himself behind a table. Vasily came round the corner. The timing couldn't be any better. Shoving the table with brute force, Beloi came to a crashing halt and skidded across the carpet.

Quickly, John closed in, all eyes watching him. He squeezed his

sidearm's trigger and planted a round into Beloi's shoulder, spilling blood onto the carpet. People screamed in shock, taken by surprise. This was nothing like the films or TVshows they watched where the antagonist was subdued _humanely_. No, John couldn't take any chances with Beloi.

"HVT secured," John broadcasted.

"_Copy," _Keyes breathed.

The Spartan hauled Beloi up to his feet and proceeded to move out. He turned to the civilians and turned on his speakers.

"Everyone, avoid the south entrance. I need you to move quickly and exit via the north end, keep moving until you meet Containment Teams. This is not a drill."

â€|

****ABOARD EYLSIUM SUN**, **IN ORBIT OF INSTALLATION-06****

Adrian was already awake, sitting upright and working away on his laptop.

He shouldn't even be moving, Lori thought.

Keyes had done his best to stabilise the Operative and heal the wounds. Just as Anders had predicted, Chen suffered a collapsed lung, a number of broken ribs and fourth degree burns to his upper body.

"You should be resting," she said.

His cobalt blue eyes flickered up from the screen, and looked back at her.

"Where's Beloi?" Chen asked.

"Interrogation room."

"And the Flood?"

"Contained for now. Keyes said all agencies are jumpy."

Grabbing hold of the blanket, Adrian tore them off and swung his legs out of the bed.

"Woah, woah! Where do you think you're going?" she asked, placing a hand on his bandaged shoulder.

"Beloi."

"You need to rest," Anders argued.

Chen walked around her, opened the medical cabinet and grabbed a vial of turquoise liquid. Opening the container he downed the contents within one gulp. It didn't taste like anything, but he knew exactly when it took effect. The pain quickly disappeared and everything was just that bit more acute.

Pulling on some fresh clothes, Chen left the medical bay with a frowning Anders in tow.

"Word from the wise, you might not want to see interrogation," he said.

"No one does," Lori countered.

â€|

Adrian watched Vasily Beloi with utmost scrutiny. Beloi was a former ODST, and part of an ONI cell called Kilo-Five. Chen was a staunch believer in what he liked to call 'a world of colours', as opposed to 'grey' and 'black and white' that everyone else sees. The Russian descendant was guided by morals and ethics that it made Chen sick to the core.

The Operative had morals and ethics, but he knew that they when they would become an impediment to the overall objective. Beloi was a loose cannon and someone who was so blinded by his own code that he failed to see different perspectives. Only Parangosky and Osman would've chosen him to carry out a clandestine mission to supply splintering Elite factions.

During the Sangheili civil war, ONISAD were sent to monitor and aid the Arbiter's Elites. Good men had been killed because of Kilo-Fives actions, the wounds were still fresh. Betrayal was never something that faded away on its own. It needed to be dealt with.

And now, it was like poetic justice for Adrian. He had the cards in his hands. He had finally reached out and aimed a savage strike at his enemy.

Beloi budged, ever so slightly. His bare chest heaved as he exhaled air out of his lungs. He was awake, and the drugs Adrian had injected into his body would ensure that Vasily would wake up feeling drowsy, stopping him from playing possum. The Operative hooked up a fresh drip of narcotics into his captive's veins.

"_Nice sleep there?"_ Adrian asked in Russian. His accent and pronunciation was flawless.

"_Who is this?"_

"You're dad, asshole," the Operative emerged from the shadows and backhanded the former ODST across the cheek.

The sound of splitting skin simmered through the room. Blood was flowing freely down Beloi's face. Nanites in his bloodstream worked to stop the flow of blood, but with the drip pumping heroine into Vasily's body, the machines were concerned elsewhere. First tactic in interrogation was to confuse and destabilise the subject's mentality.

"Were you responsible for what happened to Commander Shepard?" Keyes asked, stepping out from the shadows.

Vasily laughed, "What is the matter, General? Can't trust your own people? Only being able to work with one man?"

"Answer the question," Adrian snarled.

Another punch, another split, Vasily spat out bile mixed with blood onto the metal floor.

Scanning his eyes across Vasily's bare torso, Adrian's attention turned to the Helljumper tattoo on the man's shoulder. Rivalry within the UNSC was like sibling rivalry, each branch, each division, each unit belittled each other, but when the time came, they would be there for one another. Chen knew that this man did not deserve to bear the flaming skull tattoo.

"Yes."

Chen exhaled. "Chief, hold him down."

The Spartan-II complied and wrapped his arms around Beloi's neck in a headlock.

"Answer this next question truthfully."

Adrian's bionic arm glinted menacingly in the dimmed lights. He had yet to get skin grafted onto the aperture. The limb slit open at the seams and reformed into a long sharp serrated blade. Holding his arm over Beloi's tied hands on the armrest, Chen's eyes flared.

"Don't lie," John added. "You were bleeding a lot on the way hereâ€| that means no nanites, meaning you're going to bleed to death."

"Why did smuggle in Flood spores?"

"Parangosky ordered it."

"Now here's the hard part," Adrian said softly. "Answer me truthfully, or you're going to have to decide how much you want to lose before you tell us. Because you will tell us, eventually. Are we clear?"

"Fuck you," Beloi spat.

"Your bank account, the one under Dimitri Hovchensky. I want all the details."

A cruel smirk crossed Beloi's bloodied features.

"Looking a bit sick, Beloi. Maybe the Flood got you."

"Or maybe I can feed you to my specimens," Keyes added.

Beloi breathed in deeply. "Your friends on Thessia are walking into a trap. You can't stop it, you can't save everyone. Do your worst."

The screams lasted for a very long time.

****XXxxXX****

"_At first you don't know what to care about, you cruise through life, enjoying it with friends and family. Then you become idealistic, you abandon loved ones to go fight for a cause. But when

that first bullet flies over your head, when you hold your dying friend, when you stop and see what you willingly gaveâ€¦ you question if the fight is truly worth it. On many occasions you'll desert your cause, but never if rarely will you ever leave your brothers."

>_**_GEN Doctor Essingdon Keyes (UNSC Army and Head of ONI)**_

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Andrithir's Notes:

"_In this our sanctum, we taste only oppressionâ€¦ I ask why. We are writers and readers, guardians of intellectual property. The roots of our fandom have grown deep under our careful tending. Where there is a new writer, the wisdom of our countless generations has saturated conventions. Our strength is a luminous sun to which all intelligence blossoms and the impervious shelter beneath which our creativity has prospered. I stand before you, accusing the Critics United of the very sin of violating our sanctity, of attempting to enforce a fate on us toâ€¦ recede._

Critics United stands as the greatest threat on this site and to our domain, refusing to eradicate them is a fool's gambit. We squander months in the darkness while they strike down our triumphs for their own selfish gain. The Mantle of responsibility for all things does not belong to them.

_Think of their acts and mine as you will, but do not doubt the reality. The eradication has already begunâ€¦ and we may be hopeless to stop it."__**

>-Andrithir, rallying fandoms to unite against Critics United. An appropriation of the Didact's speech._

Some of you are wondering what I'm talking about, wellâ€¦ wonder no more. You see **_In the Shadows of Gods**_** has been taken down as the result of Critics United flagging it as a "non-story" simply because the author, Anne Whynne had posted an update which was just notes and messages (condoning CU's actions and methods). Of course at the time of removal, Whynne had already merged the A/N with a previous chapter.**

Wellâ€¦ looks like Critics United have finally come to our doorstep now. Because they played a part in taking down a flagship story of our domainâ€¦

â€¦

Anyway, please leave a review and let me know of what you think of this chapter and its characters,

60. Secrets of Athame

**A/N: Sorry I haven't updated in a very, very long time. I was technically supposed to have posted a chapter (or two) during the early period of November 2013 â€" and now it is early to mid of February 2014. Everything has been very hectic recently, I've been working non-stop because some of the staff at work have all decided to take a vacation during the holiday seasonsâ€¦

****_**again**_**.****

****Then, just when I thought I could sit down and start writing, university offers pop up. So with my most prominent offer, there's been a change of plans. I probably won't be able to write as much as I would like over the next decade or so.****

****But I will do my best to finish ****_**Lost Legacy**_**** by the end of the year, as well as unveiling a little non-canon treat. Alsoâ€¦ it looks like the rewrites will take longer than anticipated because of my upcoming studies.****

****To those who've been with me since the very beginning, thank you so much for your support. Thirteen years (or fourteen if preschool counts) down, and another ten to go.****

****As for my beta, Arec, he too will be thrown into the depths of tertiary education, and so I think it's safe to say that our rate of production would be reduced to a chapterâ€¦ per few monthsâ€¦ maybe a yearâ€¦ or two.****

â€¦

****I just realised I've forgotten about Miranda Lawson's plot segment that I had in. it'll take some fixing to do.****

****Lord Admiralsâ€¦. Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hoodâ€¦ mind = blown****

****XXxxXX****

"_Tensions are high within the Coalition leadership as Leaders demand an investigation into ONI, after the exposure of the Cerberus scandal. The Intelligence's hierarchy has declined to make any statement."

>****_**Channel 8 News**_**

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD SSV ****_**NORMANDY SR-2**_******
>IN SLIPSPACE, EN ROUTE TO THESSIA

It was coldâ€¦ eerie and yet welcoming. The air was neither alive nor dead, just somewhere in between. Primordial trees towered over the grey lands, but offered no canopy. She looked back and forth, listening to the whispers and watching the swirling shadows.

"_Get out of here, Shepard! That's an order!" a voice hissed â€¦ distant and long gone._

"_Don't worry about me, Commander. Save Ash, it's the right thing to do."_

Taking her first steps forward, Shepard's boots crunched across the ash covered leaves. She could hear a boy sobbing, breathing hitched and sniffing. She followed the crying and listened to the voices around her.

"_It is inevitableâ€¦"_

The forest shook, blackened leaves fell to the ground as a red light washed over the eerie lands.

"_You cannot stop us!" a deep male voice roared._

She could hear the cries of the Reaper wail throughout the forests, and the sickly sound of withering flesh.

"_Join your voice with ours. We are evolution!"_

Shepard's eyes shot open, panning across her softly illuminated cabin. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she blinked away the haze in her vision. Leaning her back into her pillow, she rubbed her face with both hands before looking back up at the ceiling window.

Her mind wandered back to her dream. She asked herself what it meant but found few answers. Swinging her bare feet onto the carpet floor, she padded across the room and into the en suite. With the faucet on she stepped under the hot water and let it flow over her. She stayed under until the air was humid and stifling with steam.

"_Commander, we are three hours away from Thessia,"_ EDI chimed over the PA system.

"Thanks," Shepard muttered, resting her head against the metal panel.

Turning off the faucet, she left the bathroom and donned her regular fatigues before sitting down at her desk and turning on the console. There was something nagging her, a small voice within said that there was something more sinister at play. She knew that her dream was nothing more than a result of her overtaxed sub-conscious, but why would the recesses of her mind travel there?

Maybe there was something she missed, something so obvious that she dismissed. The Flood, out of all the opportunities they could've attacked, why now? And why was there rate of dispersion soâ€|_organised_?

She had read the dispersion patterns and rate of assimilation. The UNSC had poured centuries upon centuries of research into why the Flood acted the way they did, or how they were able to communicate. One theory postulated the notion of _neural physics_.

A concept still in its adolescents within the Coalition's academic circles, scientists postulated that the Gravemind could communicate to its units through telepathy like link, through the use of neural physics. Considering what known technology the Precursors had at their disposal, the theory was quite feasible. Attempts to find a way to sever this connection through uses of the Halo Array were still inconclusive.

Though Keyes never hinted anything about Coalition strikes into Reaper/Flood territory, Shepard had a hunch that the Halo rings had been deployed for stellar pacification and purification.

Pulling up a real-time map of the galaxy, Shepard looked at the infected zones. Most of the Terminus Systems had been shaded red. Vines of yellow weaved throughout the intermittent areas between blue and infested regions. The map also showed sites of ongoing

engagements, but did not show force strength.

Additional reports showed public resentment of the UNSC, especially after the Cerberus Conspiracy. Colonies were vocal about UNSC Occupation, and some politicians were voicing concerns about the second Citadel being a possible trap to cripple the Council.

All their merits and Shepard could see that the UNSC was fighting a war that grew increasingly blurry. Flood forces were not crashing through the galaxy like a tidal wave; instead they popped up like pressurized geysers. That kind of action forced the UNSC to have contingency forces on constant standby, while the Halo Rings couldn't be used to full effect.

At least they're not screaming murder when the UNSC shows up to deal with the Flood.

Pushing against her arm rest, Shepard got up and left for the lower decks of her ship.

"Commander," Traynor greeted as Jane stepped off the elevator.

"Specialist," Shepard returned, as she made her way towards the cockpit.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHTWALKER
>_**COALITION SPACE****

John never bothered to try and question how certain things were done in ONI. Not because they were unethical, it was because they took up more time to explain when something more productive could be done instead. Barely a day had passed, and the _Nightwalker_'s armoury had already been stocked with next-generation weapons. It seemed that with the war, came more technological innovations.

Unlike most armouries aboard UNSC ships, the Prowler's was aesthetically pleasing with different intensity lights, oak accents and well-kept metal benches. The room looked more like a high-end basement containing prized possessions rather than a military facility. Evidently the previous owners had poured some of their own hard earned credits to refurbishing the ship.

"Bullpup designs have always been a bit of a hit and miss for Adrian," Keyes commented.

Since the formation of the UNSC, most of the organisation's rifles were of bullpup designs. Some of the hardliners for conventional designs voiced their distaste but as engineering improved, so did the design. Conventional front loaded weapons were almost phased out, save for a few select models.

"Think this one will be his go to?" John asked.

He remembered those missions when he was working with Adrian. The Intelligence Officer rarely used a bullpup weapon aside from the M7 SMG. But that had a different receiver to the MA5 series. Most of the time, Chen used the prototype GRM, or a modified Battle Rifle

configured to have a front load.

No weapon design was fully superior to the other. When the UNSC still had its projectile based arsenal, there were plenty of engineering solutions to make them on par with another. But then came the advent of Directed-Energy Weapons and railguns. The bullpup design benefitted from railgun technology and DEW benefitted both designs. For many, it marked the end of an era in firearms as front loaded were phased out almost completely.

"He gets Alec to modify the guns for him to be frontloaded," Keyes said. "So I'm not sure if Adrian will warm up to bullpup. But this model is a dual feed. Frontal and bullpup."

Picking up the new Fulton & Rasch SCAR-37 Mod 1, he felt the weapon's weight and got a feel for its movement. It felt sturdy, well balanced and ergonomically correct. Though John had never bothered with the aesthetics of a weapon, he couldn't help but be impressed by the design. The entire SOPMOD package had been wrapped into one streamlined and _aerodynamic_ model. It was a surprisingly elegant design when compared to the more skeletal and robust looking weapons.

The front receiver was to take power cells, while the receiver in the stock took in the magazines which stored rounds for the railgun component of the weapon. Like the Grim2, the SCAR-37's capacitors within the barrel were multipurpose.

"How much do these models cost?" John asked, admiring the weapon's functionality.

Keyes gave a short laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. It was clear this model was not going to be mass produced anytime soon.

"More than I make a month," Essingdon answered.

"Adrian might like this then," John mused.

"Here's hoping," Donnie sighed.

Setting down the SCAR-37 onto the table, John looked around for the light variant.

"If you're wondering, there is only one core variant, and two modification kits," Keyes added. "Personal Defence Rifle and Sniper."

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Soft background music swept from the speakers and swirled with the sweet coffee aroma. If Anders hadn't known any better, she would've assumed that she was back at home in her apartment. But this kitchen, regardless of how _homey_ it looked, was an ironic reminder to why she was here and not on the deck below. There is a difference in interrogating a man, and outright torturing him. To literally tear a person apart was something she couldn't do consciously, let alone willingly.

Quiet footfalls rolled across the tiled floor. Keyes looked as if he

had aged a decade within a night. His eyes were hollow and lacked focus. Pouring himself a generous cup of coffee, he downed it with one gulp before pouring another one.

"What's on your mind, Anders?" he asked.

Running her thumb across the porcelain mug, she looked at the General and shrugged.

"Sorry about dragging you into this," he sighed, easing himself into the seat across her.

"What do you mean?" Anders arched a brow in curiosity.

"The idea was to have you just for this Op, and then back to your team."

"So I'm going to be here for a while," she finished.

Keyes nodded. "We can't risk it."

"Does this have to do with something about the leak?"

"Which one?" Essingdon laughed bitterly.

"Cerberus, ONISAD the one last week," Lori reminded.

Essingdon took in a deep breath and rubbed his forehead. "That one what about it?"

"Is it why you're so desperate to find Parangosky and Osman?"

Another nod. "We all are. Ever since the leak, I've diverted resources in to protecting families and in some cases, relocating them."

Secrecy was never really an issue that Lori had to deal with while she was with the 105th Division. The Helljumper unit may have been classified as a Special Missions Unit, but clandestine missions were usually delegated to NAVSPEC and SPECWARCOM, so regulations were a bit more relaxed. 1st Airborne fell under SPECWARCOM as Operators trained for high-risk covert operations.

Though it may be difficult to conceal a Supersoldier, Tier 1 groups had an uncanny way of keeping their identities secret. However, should a group be compromised, then the members and their families would need to be relocated. Bounties placed on Operatives were high enough that even certain PMCs would take up the offer.

"The sooner we get her, the sooner we can focus on the war," Essingdon said.

"What does she want, though?" Lori asked. "Money? Fame?"

"Revenge," Keyes answered.

"Revenge?" Lori asked, incredulously. "I don't see how ex-directors are the personal vendetta types."

"My mother and her go back a bit," Keyes laughed grimly.

Upon hearing the doors part open, Lori turned to see the Master Chief enter. There had been an unspoken agreement to not refer to one another by rank or anything that would suggest that they were military. In a way, Lori felt like she'd been given a free card to call the legendary Spartan by his first name; unlike everyone else on board who had to earn that right.

Then again, if what the news said were true, Spartan-IIs were originally meant for Counter-Insurrection and Counter-Terrorism Operations. Meaning that every Spartan-IIs were never intended to be frontline soldiers, but pre-emptive strike teams. They were meant to take up the slack for ONISAD, but then the Arcani Program was implemented.

"Parangosky hated the idea of using children for counter-insurrection," Anders concluded.

"That's what she said," Keyes explained. "No one was a fan of using children, but these were desperate times. Innies were using nukes. But then she greenlighted the Spartan-III Program with her blessing. Quite the hypocritical bitch, isn't she?"

Anders noticed that the topic of children didn't bother John. He just continued on with his business, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge before sitting down at the table.

"What do we have so far?" Keyes asked the Spartan-II.

John rubbed the stubble along his jaw. "Bank accounts, a few more locations and associates. And something about Earth."

Taking a swill from the juice box, the Spartan-II continued.

"I've analysed certain speech patterns. Adrian said something was off with Beloi's behaviour."

"Your sending electricity through him, of course he's going to behave differently," Anders muttered.

Ignoring the comment, John continued. "Your dissertation of Flood spores."

"You're not serious, are you?" Essingdon frowned.

The alarms blared, in the blink of an eye; everyone was out of their seats and side arms drawn.

"_Warning, Flood presence detected in Interrogation Room Five,"_ the ship's computer droned.

Taking point, John sprinted towards the elevator. He waited for Keyes and Anders to board, before entering in the commands. Lori felt the deck lurch away from her feet, before coming to a bone jarring halt. It was a mad dash to the interrogation room.

Keyes slammed the console, forcing the door to open. Before Lori laid a sight she'd never forget. She had fought the Flood before, but it was long range engagements, never up close and personal. In the seat

where Beloi had sat, was a Combat Form.

Vasili's head was bent at an awkward angle, his arms had mutated into tentacles, his sickly limbs flailing aimlessly. A guttural inhumane sound rumbled from its chest. Red blood mixed with the horrid green to form a grotesque brown. Then the stench hit her. It was overwhelming and powerful. Anders knew what death smelt like, but this was something else entirely. She felt her gag reflexes kick in as bile rose in her throat.

"It is inevitable," a deep guttural voice rumbled. "Thessia will fall. The Old Ones cannot hold the tide of evolution. We will find them, and join their voices with ours."

The fleshy tentacles flailed around its mouth, spurting a green mist into the air. Adrian's hand hovered over his sidearm, a split second later the safeties were off and sights aligned. Vasli's corps broke and burned into ashes, floating down onto the deck.

"Shit," Adrian muttered.

"Why didn't we see that?" Keyes gritted, stepping towards ash covered chair.

"We have to tell Command," John urged.

"We'll head back to _Night_ _Horse_, and warn Command and warn Shepard," Keyes said, he then pointed towards Lori and Adrian. "You two stay here."

"Why?" Chen asked.

"You should be resting, and like it or not, your little stunt has put Riley's crosshairs on Anders," Keyes said adamantly. "And, last thing we want is for them to receive a stream from this ship. Besides, if anything goes wrong on the home front, at least you can help Anna."

"_Incoming message,"_ the ship computer chimed. "_Anna Greenfield."_"

"Patch it through," Keyes ordered.

"_Keyes,"_ she sounded drained and tired. "_After that stunt you pulled at LA, HighCom is getting jumpy. They all know that you sanctioned it. They just don't know you were there. You've got to come in and talk to the Committee. There'll be politicians there as well. People back home aren't happy."_"

"Now?" Keyes growled.

"_Now,"_ Anna's voice rang. "_Ambassador Richard Enderfield is also trying to smooth things out with the new Council. The leak has done damages to us and our image as well as the UNSC's. It has jeopardized possible future political relations. HighCom wants an investigation."_"

"Of me?"

"_Of everyone,"_ Greenfield corrected. "_The UEG is calling for

Federal Agencies to do an external investigationâ€¦ look I have to go and smooth some things over. I'll call you back later."_

The link shut off, leaving a bewildered and tired General.

"To hell with it," he muttered. "I'll talk to Riley. Anders, you're coming with me. We need to get you back on the front. John, stay here with Adrian."

"Yes sir," the Chief nodded.

Pacing around the room, Keyes exhaled and looked at the ash choked chair. He rubbed the back of his head, and furrowed his brows.

"We're missing somethingâ€¦"

****XXxxXX****

****ARMOURY BAY 009**

>ABOARD UNSC _MAJESTIC**_****

>IN SLIPSPACE, EN ROUTE TO THESSIA

Fhajad had always considered himself to be a morale and rational man. He had sat through the first Human-Covenant War in a wheelchair, where he wrote physics thesis that changed the face of naval warfare. His analytical mind drew up battle plans which stalled the juggernaut. Over the recent years, he had begun to return to the field.

"Soâ€¦ we're really doing this," Alec grinned, tapping his foot.

The Spartan-II looked at Herschon, folding both arms.

"Yes, happy?"

"Very."

Leaning against the bench, Fhajad panned his eyes across the menacing weapon perched atop a large workbench. The sapper had managed to put in a _requisition order_ for three railguns, and an M888 HMG. The end result was an M888 on steroids, capable of firing specialised munitions. Like the Council Space weapons, the UNSC also possessed Fabricator Tech, however due to advancements in weaponry, the thought of adding it to a gun was never seriously considered â€" the eccentric engineer's thought wasn't considered serious.

"How are you going to use this thing?" Fhajad frowned.

Another grin spread on Alec's lips as he walked to the far side of the room, and punched in the controls. The panels hissed as it was unlocked and slid open. Fhajad's brows arched as he saw the harnessed gear within.

"You like it?"

"That thing is damned huge," the Spartan-II murmured.

The armour looked like a streamlined HRUNTING Defense Exoskeleton, but its interface was suited to Alec's android body. Though despite

its massive size, it was going to be able to fit inside the hold of an Osprey.

"Soâ€¦ game plan?"

"Same as always."

"Hate to break it to you," Alec sighed. "But I haven't been out in a while."

"Intel says that there are jamming towers to stop us from using the Array. Section-Three and HighCom want to know what it isâ€¦"

"And stop the asari, or the turian or the salarians getting their hands on it. Righto."

"If initial assault fails, Navy has orders to bombard the tower," Fhadjad continued.

"But lemme guess, brain trusts says that full salvo can only take down the towerâ€¦ so better to knock on the door."

The Spartan-II nodded.

Pulling on their respective armour, Fhadjad performed a quick systems check before manually inspecting Alec's exoskeleton. Satisfied that everything was in working order, the two descended the decks and entered the main assembly area in the hangar.

As they walked over to Fifth Element, Herschon hanged back a bit to grab another pack of rations while Fhadjad continued onwards.

"We still need an Engineer for this op," Riley said, eyes front and looking at the battle plan.

"I've got someone in mind."

"Who?"

A metal clatter rolled across the deck, followed by another and another, in a methodical fashion.

"You didn't," Riley glared.

"We're short on sappers, and he wants to go," Fhadjad said.

"There's a reason why most of us don't take him," Sanders argued.

The two turned around, and faced Herschon with his retracted visor revealing a cheery grin. He cradled his heavy weapon as if he was a child holding a stuff toy and gave the Paramilitary Officer his best puppy dog eyes.

"Gee willikers Riley," he squealed sarcastically. "Thank you for having me!"

Riley's glare hardened at Fhadjad.

"Damn it."

Alec cleared his throat, his voice dropping several octaves.

"Oh suck it up, you pansy. Daddy is here to save the day."

"That gun is overkill," Riley gripped.

"There's no such thing as overkill," Alec countered dramatically.
"Just a well done job."

"But that gun is overkill," Sanders repeated with a gesture.

Saps smirked with a sinister glee, "the only kind of kill is over kill."

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****ABOARD SSV*_** NORMANDY SR-2*_**
>IN LOW ORBIT OF THESSIA**

Within the safety of the Normandy, Cortana watched the endless struggle of warfare surge around her. Though a small part of her loathed that EDI was at the helm and not her, she did take peace in that she could just watch everything unfold around her.

In the second it took for a ship to realign itself, she had already calculated countless scenarios and pathways for victory and defeat. She knew that on Thessia, the fate of the asari homeworld hanged in the balance. She could see it from hundreds of orbital camera angles.

Thousands of ancient ships, dating back to the Forerunner Empire, surged from the blackness that was between spaces. They ducked and dived, swooped and banked within the planet's orbit. Coalition Frigates and Destroyers struck hard and fast with their devastating main guns. Corvettes followed in close behind to deploy mines and consumed the parasitic ships in a brilliant fireball.

The cacophony of chaos, roared in silence around her. Impressive Keyships and Elite vessels prowled through the void like sharks, tearing through anything in their path. But they weren't without injury. The Infinite Resolute and the UNSC Hammerfall had vicious black scars running across their hulls, and their emissions wavered. But they were still dangerous to the Flood fleet.

Hundreds of ships surged towards the flagships in the hopes of overwhelming the defenders and claiming the juicy prize. Cortana watched as the Interceptors circle their ships like wasps and their hives. Countless dots of amber winked in and out of existence as the Claymores and Seraphs engaged the Flood assault boats.

She wanted to be in the fight, to be with the ships. She didn't mind where, just so long as she was in a destroyer or a flagship, it made no difference. She was an AI that outclassed so many, and she could always adapt.

But her fight was not in the endless blackness; her fight was on the ground at Shepard's side. Through the Normandy's upgraded hardware, Cortana had unprecedented control over a UCAD7 Heavy Panther Drone a squadron of UCAD7 Medium Raven Drones.

Cortana's task was to provide tactical support for Shepard and her team.

"Temple of Athame is just around the corner; make it quick," the AI said. "Things up here are getting dicey."

"_I can tell," _the Spectre said, turning her attention skyward.

Countless fiery streaks with a smoky tail filled the evening sky as debris burned in the atmosphere. But a large number weren't hull sections; they were drop pods, filled with supplies for ground forces, ODSTs or Flood.

"_When we get to Outpost Tykis, we should get a shot in."_

The AI saw the Commander frowned as she gripped her rifle. Cortana had held Shepard in high regards since day one. What the Spectre had accomplished was nothing short of a miracle—_luck_, Cortana had called it; the ability to defy all odds and come out swinging.

Of course she did kind of feel threatened that Shepard was taking her place as the Chief's partner, but she had to remind herself that she wasn't the first. That illustrious position was held by Kelly for half a century. If anything, John had found an equal.

Through the countless numbers of scenarios Cortana had calculated, an internal war within the UEG's Intelligence Community was about to unfold. Shepard and the Chief may not be at the heart of it, but they were more than close enough to the epicentre. If subterfuge and clandestine actions were to run rampant, then those who could be a public bulwark against the conflict, would be the heroes of humanity.

It was imperative that Shepard and John survived—no matter the cost.

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In the short time that Shepard had gotten to know Cortana, she found the AI to be slightly quirky with a dry sarcastic sense of humour. _Down to earth_ as the Spectre would describe it. Talking to the AI wasn't like talking to Legion or EDI, who were striving to understand and define their purpose.

UNSC AI's were so much like real people, from the way they talked to the way they performed their task. Legion and EDI rarely — if ever — created a graphical representation of their tasks unless absolutely necessary. Cortana on the other hand, used holographic projectors to convert her process into imagery information, regardless if it was necessary or not.

Jane found that to be endearing, and could see why Coalition soldiers were far more open to artificial intelligences. She also couldn't help but note how the AI had taken her form of her original avatar.

She panned her eyes across the Thessian Skyline, marred with fire and flesh. The Flood attack was reported to be abrupt without

forewarning. UNSC defensive measures were wiped out immediately, leaving the asari homeworld vulnerable long enough before a Coalition task force could arrive.

"Cortana, I need a full sitrep," Shepard ordered, slightly annoyed at the amount of unnecessary tactical data being fed through her HUD.

"The Elites have created a foothold, three kilometres away from the temple, however they're under heavy attack; Fifth Element is responding. Naval operational capacity up here is currently down to ninety per cent. Our chances of holding Thessia is, _slim_."

Jane frowned.

"Are you always this pessimistic?" the Spectre asked rhetorically.

"The numbers here aren't painting a pretty picture," the AI replied.

"Best course of action?"

There was a slight pause as the AI performed her calculations. Shepard watched Cortana's hologram pull up a tactical map display. It was a bit surreal, watching a small humanoid hologram perched atop a menacing ground drone, performing her task with a very human-like devotion.

"UNSC Forces have cleared out most of the way to the Temple, but there are the problems of stragglersâ€¦ shouldn't be too hard for us to handle," she smirked.

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****APPROACH TO JAMMER NETWORK
>THESSIA**

Right off from the drop, they had landed into hell. Unlike Cipritine, the Flood hit the asari before anyone knew what was going on. It was a little too convenient for Riley's liking. When the parasite arrived in a system, they would immediately smash the defences head on, while a smaller incursion force would land undetected and destroy the population from within.

But as the Osprey rumbled on its approach, he knew that the time between the Flood's arrival in the system and their landfall was far too short.

The dropship shuddered again, the structure creaking. Stuffing away his thoughts, Riley ran his fingers along his rifle and drew in a deep breath. This was just like his days in the Airborne. Helljumpers had the joy of entrusting their own lives to their own ability of piloting their pod down to the surface.

Airborne usually entrusted their lives to the pilot. Of course there were times when they jumped into hell via a HALO or LOLO jump without a drop pod. But every skirmish would eventually lead to dropship rides. He hadn't realised how lucky he had been to survive thus far, but being with ONISAD was no easy road either.

"_ETA to LZ in five,"_ the pilot said.

Peering out the windows, Riley's eyes panned across the sun bathed landscape, drowning in diseased flesh. Sporadic AA fire streaked up into the skies, targeting the flying forms, while explosions ripped across the metropolis in plumes of smoke and fire.

"Ready?" Alec asked.

Riley nodded.

Gunners began to open fire, drenching the fields in a sea of blue energy. Hatches opened, and ropes dropped.

"Go! Go! Go!" Fhajad barked.

Latching himself onto the ropes, he slid down to the warped tiles of a street way and strafed to his right. He levelled his rifle and panned the area, waiting for the rest of his team.

Alec was soon on the ground, he hadn't bothered with the ropes because of his internalised thrusters. He used the rear doors. Soldiers in the Airborne preferred not to use their jumpjet packs when leaving the dropship. The switched between freefall followed by thrust was too disorienting, and time consuming. It was easier to use the ropes.

"The Elites have got us foothold in the area, we'll move in and support them," Fhajad said.

"Let's do this," Thorne agreed.

Moving along street level, the advance teams combed every section with eyes and sensors. Sentinels and Drones led the way, but it never hurt to double check. Every so often, a drone operator would spool up the guns and open fire, shredding a flying form into burnt ash.

"Keep your suits airtight, we don't want a spore infecting us," Thorne reminded.

With heavy armour and firepower as his forte, Alec took point. A firestorm of plasma surged from his weapon like a tidal wave, reducing metal to slag and wood to ash. Plasma-projectors, the new age's devastating flamethrower.

The Sentinels were clearing the bulk of the Flood in the surrounding areas, but soon or later they would come across the heavier breeds, and that was when the advance would be stalled.

"Jammer tower is just four clicks ahead," Alec said.

Radio transmissions were garbled, but superluminal communications were working just fine. There were concerns about friendly fire against the asari, but Riley doubted he had to worry about that. They were approaching ground zero. No one here from the start would've survived the outbreak.

Looking up at the NavMarker on his HUD, Riley saw the tower,

reminiscent of the Forerunner's angular design. It stood out against Thessia's curvature theme, and was uniquely eerie with the vines of flesh wrapping the entire length of the construct.

"Contact," Thorne hissed.

Red outlines appeared on the HUD as active scanners picked up the infected. A second wave of drones and Sentinels moved in to reinforce the advance teams. Riley took cover behind a heavy ground drone, and rested the gripod of his rifle against the protective metal plate.

"Open up!" a Chalk Leader barked.

At the squeeze of a trigger, a firestorm of energy filled the streets, burning the first skirmish of Flood. Incendiary weapons burned through flesh and bone, reducing the combat forms into piles of smouldering ash.

"Anyone know when mechanised and armoured will get here?" Blaze asked.

"What? And let them have all the fun?" Viper joked.

"The city is too hot for armoured, they're going to be at the outskirts," Riley answered. "Mechanised will make their way in from the limits, no suitable LZ for them."

"Wellâ€¦ more fun for me," Herschon chimed, hefting his weapon.

The multi-barrel weapon was already smoking from excessive use.

"So where are the Sangheili?" Viper asked.

"Elites up ahead, the Arbiter's with them," Thorne answered.

"Arbiter? Figures," Blaze muttered.

Unlike the UNSC, the Sangheili's martial culture demanded that leaders had to fight on the frontlines from time to time. In their eyes, a leader had to lead from the front and not from the safeties of a command unit behind the battle.

"Arby? Groovy," Alec grinned.

Riley's features hardened as he clenched his fists and relaxed.

There was rubble and artillery craters everywhere, navigating their way safely through it all was frustratingly slow. Sanders preferred to fight like an Airborne in a straight up fight. They always had the support of close-air and dropships ferrying them in and out of skirmishes quickly.

But against the Flood, that kind of tactic was rendered ineffective. He hated that.

â€¦

It was a rinse and repeat process. The Flood would attack, the Coalition would stand their ground and hose everything down. In a head to head fight, having Hunters was a clear advantage. Their massive size and awesome firepower reduced any parasitic lance into blackened smears on the ground.

Alec was Fifth Element's very own Hunter. Though Riley was starting to wish he had an actual Hunter. The massive beasts were far more respectful and poetic than the ironic and sarcastic Engineer.

Upon reaching the base of the tower, Sanders quickly swept the perimeter with his optics. Red filled his vision like overlapping veins of blood. The parasite was everywhere.

Gesturing to the Airborne who had formed up around him, he signalled for the demolitions specialists to place thermite tape around the door. Then he ordered the plasma-projectors to standby.

"Charges planted," a sapper said.

"Detonate!" Riley barked.

The tape sparked and burned brilliantly as it boiled its way through the metal. Secondary charges went off and blew the burnt off chunk inwards.

"Go! Go! Go!" Sanders roared.

The Airborne soldiers hefting the plasma projectors quickly positioned themselves at the breach and torched the keep of the tower.

Red receded from the breach as the parasites were burned away. Riley motioned for the assaulters to go through. Men armed with automatic shotguns outfitted with Catalyst rounds entered the tower in a methodical fashion, just like they had trained for back at base.

The shotguns roared and bucked as they spat out fiery and pellets that would reduce flesh to amber ash. Gold Catalyst Rounds possessed more energy than Cobalt â€" despite what the light spectrum would suggest â€" and thus were given to assaulters and clean-up crew.

Entering the breach, Riley panned his eyes across the blackened room with veins of glowing gold embers.

"Make this quick, no unnecessary risks," Sanders reminded.

"Yes MOOOOOM," Alec joked.

Riley glared at the Engineer.

"Plant the charges, and let's get out. I'll see you all at the temple."

As planned, the assault groups split up into smaller teams. Each team would be carrying a thermobaric device that would emit a specialised explosive agent into the air. In this gaseous compound, were particles with similar chemical compositions to that used in C12. One device was more than enough to disable the tower, but Command wanted

to be sure.

Multiple devices would ensure a faster rate of dispersion and higher yield.

But Riley and his team wouldn't be taking part in the demolition of the installation. Fhajad had something else in mind for Fifth, but he had neglected to tell them and for good reason too.

Waiting until all the assault teams had left for their objectives â€" Alec included. The Spartan-II gave Fifth a quick rundown.

"We've got confirmed reports of a Salarian STG team operating in the area. Gathering Intel on the tower. I need to be at the Temple."

Nothing more needed to be said. They all knew what needed to be done, Riley was sure of it. He checked the twins, but they were all on the same page. Despite having passed the training program, they weren't green like most graduates. The twins knew what they were in for. This was why an ONSIAD team was deployed to a battlefield in the first place; counter-intelligence.

Retreating from the perimeter, Riley watched as more soldiers and drones reinforced the perimeter. It would be easier to just bombard the tower. But the Fleet was preoccupied and Air Force didn't have enough firepower to destroy the installation.

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****JAMMER TOWER 1****

Finger on the trigger, Alec made a slow slog as he cleared out the tower room by room. The installation wasn't that big to begin with. The Flood had taken a suitably sized building in the metropolitan area and renovated it to suit their needs.

The entire tower had been fortified, glass panels were replaced with armoured hulls, and doors had been welded shut. Regardless, the assault team was making progress.

After navigating their way through parasitic vine covered halls and encountering the occasional combat form, Alec and his group arrived in the main atrium. It lacked the artistic curvature present in all asari architecture, instead it was replaced by Forerunner themes.

Though Alec's experience with the Flood was nowhere near as Keyes's, he did note that it was odd for the Flood to model anything after themselves and what they've recently assimilated. Forerunner didn't fall into the recent category. If this was psychological warfare, it was having a confusing effect.

Shoving away his concerns, he waited for Lieutenant Jake Andrews to finish reeling off commands. Herschon performed a quick sweep of the area with his sensors. There was a strong electromagnetic signature running along the length of the central support struts, and an energy core signature resonating in the basement area.

"We need more light," Andrews called.

Instinctively, the Airborne soldiers began to toss chemical lights in all directions. Against the backdrop a blue hue, yellow rays swept across the darkness.

"Well shit," Alec sighed.

In the centre of the atrium was a gaping hole. A frown spread across his features when he saw the explosive damage caused in the area. The Flood preferred to batter and ram, not use explosives. The tear marks at the elevator doors was proof of that.

Reaching into his rear pouch, he pulled out a small recon drone and piloted it down into the opening. Passive scans and air analysis revealed that thermite was used in the subterranean breach. Damage to the supports was minimal. He filled those thoughts away for later, but he knew that this was a predetermined assault.

"After you," Andrews gestured.

Pushing off the ledge, Alec plummeted through the opening. His system's alarms began to ping when the ground rushed up to greet him. Activating his jetpack, the thrusters heaved a torrent of energy to slow his rate of descent, landing him safely in the basement. An eye blink later, and he was joined by Airborne, securing the perimeter.

He scanned the surrounding areas, took in the sight of burning skycars and maintenance trucks. Tracing the scorch marks, his eyes settled on the site of a burned out crater. Ground zero for the outbreak, but it looked like the transport vehicle had been scrambled. The burnt, melted and warped wreckage was unidentifiable.

"Command, this is Chalk-Nine Actual. We've found a possible fix for the Flood outbreak."

"_Copy that. Move quickly gentlemen, I want the jammer down within the hour,"_ the controller acknowledge.

"Roger that, sir."

The core was located a few more levels below. Following the EM signatures, Alec found himself looking at a simple fusion drive, linked to a rail of magnetic coils. The prize was the frequency modulator which determined the shield classification and strength.

That module was located beneath the central spire of the building. Running his hands along the smooth surface, the engineer made a mental note of the lack of Flood presence. He and his team had made their way through the maze of server routers and data stores, and not once did they encounter anything.

The air ducts, sewerage system, everything was clear. The Sentinels and drones didn't detect anything. But at least they knew how the Flood managed to spread throughout the planet so quickly.

Moving up to the module, Saps ran spectral scans on the object. Specifications, power output, and electromagnetic signature were all

recorded including penetrating scans with every sensor. It took longer than expected due to the sheer size of the module, but he got it done. Satisfied that he had obtained enough data to keep the scientists happy for months to come, Alec gave a nod to Andrews.

"Command, intel has been obtained. We are prepping charges now."

"_Wilco. Acknowledgement on shield and jammer deactivation will be confirmed once charges are detonated. Move and assist the Arbiter, Flood's got him bogged down in the city central."_

"Roger that, moving there now," Andrews clicked.

Doubling timing through the maze of servers, then up into the carport, the assault teams retreated back into the main atrium as the explosive agents were dispersed. Alec dug into the ground beneath him as he sprinted towards the minimal safe distance.

A small part of him wished he was with the teams on the higher levels. Their vertical advantage allowed them to rocket out of the building and land safely at the control perimeter.

Throwing himself behind the safety of a barricade, he readied the detonator in his hand.

"FIRE IN THE HOLE!" He roared.

A few echoing cries rolled down the line as soldiers took cover. At the squeeze of the trigger, Herschon felt the Earth shake, followed by an ear splitting thunderous roar. Fiery tendrils ripped out of the building as an invisible hand tore the reinforcing shutters out of from their positions. Debris rained down on the ground, before being jerked violently inward.

Thermobaric warheads always created a devastating vacuum in their wake. Like an exploding sun, the tower shed off most of its outer mass before collapsing in on itself and kicking up a dust cloud.

Smiling to himself, Alec stood up and surveyed the damage to the asari metropolitan. There was still more work to be done, but at least they had gained a foothold on the region. Orbiting gunships provided much needed fire support to clear our landing zones for small elements of mechanised infantry.

One down, more to go.

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****TEMPLE OF ATHAME****

And just as Cortana had predicted, there were nothing but stragglers to deal with. A few biotic blasts here and there, and the small group was already at the Temple.

Cortana's drones had fanned out and formed a rough delta defence perimeter, setting up additional shield boost relays and barriers for protection. Shepard took the centre of the formation, while Javik

took the right flank, and Vega the left. Thane took a position a few meters behind Shepard so that he could offer the most devastating effect with his sniper rifle.

With a secure perimeter, T'Soni settled by the security node and accessed the Temple's network.

"That's military grade encryption," Liara murmured.

"Why would they need military codes for this?" Shepard asked, though she had a good idea why. Being a vassal of the UNSC did allow the Alliance to have an unprecedented level of access to Intelligence information.

"I don't know either, but the temple's secrets are only for high ranking asari officials."

Javilk's tense demeanour didn't pass Shepard unnoticed, but she decided not to press him about it, now wasn't the time.

"Cortana, how are we holding?" Shepard asked.

The AI's hologram flickered to life atop the Panther Drone.

"Coalition Forces are sustaining moderate damage in orbit. Ground troops aren't doing any better. We need to wrap this up, and help the evacuation."

"Okay, let's make this quick," Jane breathed.

Keying in her mike, she called Palmer.

"_Yeah?"_ a voice answered breathlessly.

"What's you're ETA?"

"About â€" dammit â€" give or take five more minutes. We're being bogged down by Flood forces. Fifth is already heading your way... we'll buy you sometime, out."

On her HUD, Shepard switched the full battlemap FOF tags. She could see Fifth Element coming closer until her own suit sensors picked them up.

They arrived in battered Warthogs, configured for rapid dismounts and reconnaissance. The titanium roof frame was heavily warped by plasma bombardment, and the engines were leaking coolant.

Men from the 2nd Airborne Division quickly dismounted and formed a defensive perimeter. The third Hog in the formation pulled up to Cortana's drone. Fhadjad dismounted the vehicle and panned his sites warily across the temple. He was wearing the GEN5 coupled with a four-focal goggles.

"Where's the rest?" Shepard asked.

"Rearguard," Fhadjad answered.

He looked over to Liara who was bypassing the firewalls of the

Temple.

"A lot of defensive measure for a temple," he pondered. "Maybe the asari know what we're looking for."

The blue barriers at the entrance flickered out of existence, and with a satisfied smirk, Liara beckoned the assault team to go through.

Moving inside, Shepard instinctively swept the area with her sights, before egressing to the left side and avoiding the central aisle.

"Clear!" she broadcasted.

Slowly lowering her rifle, Jane walked over to T'Soni who was by the base of the statue.

"Athame," Liara recalled. "It was said that Athame blessed the asari with knowledge and wisdomâ€¦"

"This is a Prothean artefact," Javik interrupted with a growl.

"What?"

"Athame speaks Protheanâ€¦ your ancestors were hiding the truth, and the Humans have found it. I can sense its presence."

Shepard's eyes followed the Prothean as he paced across the marble floor. She stepped up to the base of the statue. The floor vibrated as the statue of Athame hummed, encased in a turquoise glow. She could feel a strange energy coming from it; similar to what she felt the first time she showed signs of being a biotic.

Closing her eyes, she could hear the same soft pitch and a calmness too it. She knew that feeling.

"There's a Prothean beacon here," Jane said, cutting off all conversation.

"Are you sure?" Liara asked, wide-eyed.

"It's not something you forget."

"But why hide it?"

"The answer is obvious. Power and influence," Javik growled, turning to the asari scientist. "Your people are hoarding the knowledge of my race for their own gain."

Liara furrowed her brows and sighed deeply.

"This is a debate for another timeâ€¦ we need to move quickly before the Flood reaches the temple in force."

As Jane placed her hand on the base of the statue, the artefact began to hum louder as a luminous turquoise mist seeped out from the unseen seams.

"The beacon on Ilos that gave you the Cipher, this artefact must think you're Prothean," Liara murmured.

"Or it could be the Prothean standing right next to you," Javik interjected.

Vines of green light slithered along the surface of stone and slowly ebbed into the cracks. As every hum and every thump passed, the cracks grew wider. Chunks of the statue fell off and shattered onto the metal foundation. Eventually all that was left was a Prothean plinth, glowing with power. A small turquoise orb faded into existence, its surface composed of swirling circular plates until it reached chest level and held its position.

"Obtaining chronological markerâ€¦ hold," a disembodied male voice said. Like Javik, it had a Nigerian accent. "Time scale established, post-Prothean cycle confirmed."

"One of our computers," Javik said softly, walking across the purple hue floors towards the orb.

Rising up to the ceiling, the orb thrummed again.

"Reaper presence detected. Parasitic entity detected. This galaxy has already reached its extinction terminus," the orb descended. "Systems shutting down."

"Hold on!" Liara cried.

"We need answers," Shepard demanded.

"To what question?" the orb asked, floating into Jane's face.

"We've detected high concentration of energy readings," Fhadjad interrupted. "Far higher than anything Prothean we've encountered."

That's because you haven't encountered that many Prothean artefacts, Shepard said inwardly. _Or maybe you know something we all don't._

The orb retreated back in the centre of the formation, and morphed into a Prothean warrior.

"A memory," Javik smiled. "Of one of my people."

"I am called Vendetta," the Prothean VI introduced itself. "An advanced virtual construct of Pashek Van, overseer of the project you refer to as 'Crucible'."

The VI mimicked personality traits of his base template, walking back and forth with military discipline and a weary sway.

"He died fighting the Reapers in the battle of Tranbir Nine. Your remaining time is also at an endâ€¦"

"But we have beaten the Reapers!" Liara argued. "We've activated the Crucible."

"The asari speaks the truth," Javik supported. "The Reclaimer humans

are far more powerful than the Reapers."

The VI looked at Javik, then across the entrance and outside the temple. He paused for a moment, watching the fiery streaks and the distant airborne Flood amongst the chaotic gunfire.

"Parasitic life forms detected," the VI repeated. "Flood threat confirmedâ€¦ probability of survival is slim."

"You knew about the Flood?" Fhadjad questioned, walking to the side of a bench.

The VI nodded.

"Yes, the installation held a warning of a parasite. A being called the Librarian monitored us, and until finally, she deemed us worthy of receiving her gifts. We used this technology to develop Prothean weapons capable of dissolving organic life."

Prothean Particle Rifle, Shepard linked.

"When the Reapers arrived, she gave us another gift to increase the effectiveness of the Crucible. Were it not for her, the Crucible would not have been ready for you to complete."

"Why didn't you use it?" Shepard asked.

"We were sabotaged from within. A splinter group argued we should dominate the Reapers rather than destroy them. It fractured our order of battle. Later we discovered the separatists had been indoctrinated."

Fhadjad stepped closer to the VI.

"The Installationâ€¦ we need to find it."

Shepard's eyes flickered over to the Spartan-II. She knew the UNSC and the UEG in general held a very tight lid on their technology. But would Forerunner technology belong to humanity alone? She could understand where the desperation for dominance stemmed from. It wasn't a lust for power, but a deeply rooted survival instinct.

"The entrance is this way, please follow."

Cortana had remained oddly quiet during the entire parley; her mind seemed _elsewhere_ if that was possible. Her avatar was projected on a smaller raven drone looked _disengaged_. Jane could see the scrolls of equations and symbols.

"Is there something wrong?" Shepard asked.

The AI nodded.

"I'm picking up encrypted chatterâ€¦ might be nothingâ€¦ but I'm not too sure."

"Can you brute force it?" Fhadjad asked.

"Noâ€¦ I can barely isolate it. I'm getting shredsâ€¦ but it sounds like ONI."

Superluminal communication in the Coalition relied heavily on Forerunner Tech. Virtually untraceable or detectable; ONI used these methods to send encrypted data across vast distance in an instant. Having the Intelligence Organisation use conventional methods in the field was like having Prowlers communicate with one another by flashing light signals. It was only done to send a message to a third party.

Fhajad was already aware of this; Shepard could see it in his body language. He was concerned. His shoulders tense.

"We need to move," he pushed.

Vendetta led them to the back wall atop the stage. At the command of a silent and unseen gesture, seams appeared on the smooth metal surface. The purple hue chrome slab retracted into the floor and revealed a hallway that was uniquely Prothean. Shepard ran her eyes along the long pulsating columns of emerald amongst the polished back drop of black and grey.

The entire journey was practically conducted in silence, ONI Operatives fanned out into a kill house clearing formation.

Everywhere Shepard looked, there was asari tech interfacing with Prothean tech, which in turn interface with Forerunner tech.

"Before the creation of the Crucible, Pashek Van oversaw the research of this installation," Vendetta explained. "Information from this terminal was heavily encrypted. But we discovered an occupant."

"Alive?"

"Yes," the VI nodded. "It's origin unknown. It has divulged only little information. We know it as the Creators of the Reapersâ€¦ Leviathan."

Entering what appeared to be an elevator, the group immediately took firing positions by kneeling down and having their weapons pointed outwards.

Eventually, the panel left the shaft and entered a large cavernous room, reminiscent of the Forerunner hangars Jane had seen within the video recordings back at the Museum of Humanity. Her eyes gazed upon a glass wall spanning the dimension of the cavern, holding back the water. An underwater cave stretching out until it became one with the darkness it shrouded.

With a soft hum, the platform stopped in the centre of the hall. There were signs of asari scientists having analysed everything the Forerunners and Protheans had. Like Javik had said, everything inside this installation was far more than enough to give the asari a technological edge.

To the sides of the room, there was a backdrop of Forerunner terminals, and Prothean plinths interfacing with the much older constructs.

"Incredible," Liara breathed. "All this informationâ€¦"

We might not have been in this mess if the asari decided to share, Jane pondered.

Would we do the same in their position? Another voice argued.

"Didâ€¦ did this Librarian ever warned us of the Reapers?" Javik asked Vendetta.

The VI _walked_ to the Prothean's side and shook his head.

"No, she only mentioned the parasite."

"That was because she did not know of the Reapers," a deep baritone voice rumbled. It felt like it was coming from everywhere. From within the mind or the body or somewhere beyond.

She couldn't quite explain it, only that she _felt_ the voice.

"We've got movement," Fhadjad gestured, pointing his hand towards the glass pane.

"The Leviathan, only reveals itself when it wishes," Vendetta explained.

The creature was like a cross between a crustacean and a cuttlefish. It was massive in size and scope, gliding through the water until it stopped next to the observation port.

The creators of the Reapersâ€¦ they created the Reapers in their own shape.

"Shepard," the ancient being rumbled. "You are wrong. We created a solution that would allow the continuation of organic life."

"An AI," the Spectre interjected. "The Catalyst."

"Yes. Our construct looked to preserve us, and so Harbinger was created."

"It turned on you."

"No, it was merely fulfilling its purpose. We hid, and watched. The Reapers. You have disproved our equation. We have seen the cycle come to an end, and a new one forged."

Shepard looked into the being's eyes as she paced in front of the glass pane.

"What new cycle?"

"Since the rise of those you call, Precursorsâ€¦ we saw the regression of their creations. The Flood, they are not the failsafe you believe them to be."

"We believed the Flood was created to destroy the Forerunner Empire," Fhadjad said.

"No, it was a means for self-preservation. Much like the Forerunner's Composer, the Precursors sought to preserve themselves, but their means soured and so they became the Flood."

"Then— what are you doing here?" Shepard asked.

"I have spent eons, watching and listening," Leviathan rumbled. "Like the Flood, the children of the Precursors have always been the greatest threat to, and the greatest hope for galactic stability."

"What do you mean?" Jane questioned.

The Leviathan slowly retreated into the darkness.

"Wait!"

But it did not reply. The being's eyes dimmed and faded away from sight.

"Dammit," Shepard hissed.

"Don't bother," Fhajang said. "He's not there anymore."

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD UNSC **_**NIGHT HORSE**_****
>IN SLIPSPACE EN ROUTE TO THESSIA

Opening up an encrypted channel, Keyes contacted the _Divinus_.

"_Donnie, what a surprise,"_ Miranda beamed over the feed.

"Hey, Miri. Where's Hood posted you?"

"_Why don't you ask him yourself? Or your network?"_ she joked.

Essingdon gave a soft half smile. Noticing his saddened expression, Miranda's tone softened.

"_What's wrong?"_

"Don't worry about it," Keyes brushed, rubbing the back of his neck. "But, I just want to hear it from you."

"_I'll admit, I do miss working on a frigate, but it's nice to know that a destroyer has a bigger bite. Hood's got me and Task Force Three-Seven-Charlie on a few hit and run raids to buy evac more time. It's a bit tough going up against Flood ships, but I think we'll be fine."_

"Be careful, okay? If anyone comes up to you and says they're ONI or whatever, report them to me or Greenfield immediately."

Miranda frowned.

"_Donnie, what's going on?"_

Rubbing his forehead, Keyes gave a tired yawn before looking back at the screen.

"Rogue cells, Miri. I've ordered everyone to stay away from you and TF Three-Seven-Charlie. Stay safe."

"_And sleep with an eye open, got it."_

The feed was terminated as Keyes took a deep breath. Exhaling, he tapped the console to open up the interface. Manual input, it always felt nicer than talking to a voice input. It made Keyes feel helpless when he had to get an AI to do a menial task for him. Granted there were times when it is convenient, but he didn't like to lose sight of himself. With the interface opened, he entered in the commands to contact the _Majestic_.

"_General Keyes, how may I be of service?"_ _Majestic_'s AI asked.

"I'd like to speak with Officer Two-Five-Four-Eight Romeo Sierra."

"Certainly, connecting you to Deck-Four now."

There was a brief pause in the feed as the call was redirected.

"_Keyes, what can I do for you?"_

"Palmer."

"_What about her?"_

"_Send her back to the Ark. I'm sending Anders. She'll take up tactical command of SPARTAN. Fhajad will be acting CO."_

"_Are you sure we can trust her?"_

Essingdon formulated a white lie. The last thing he needed was to have one of his own men killing an _innocent_ Spartan-IV

"She's cleaner than Palmer, if that's what you're asking."

"_If you say so, sir."_

"Alright, I'll see you later."

"_Later."_

XXxxXX

"_Religion is an ideology with the belief of a deity or deities. And ideology is a lens, it all depends on where we are, and hence our point of view."

>_**-Philosopher Thomas Wong**_

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His gripe was with the differences between ceremonial dress uniform and service uniform. The fact that ceremonial was referred to by as both _ceremonial_ and _ceremonial_ _dress_ didn't help either despite the fact that they were one and the same. Regardless, he stopped his mind from wandering and looked back at down at his speech in hard copy.

His mind tended to wander whenever he was about to do something he was going to dread. Thinking about the uniform was one of them.

Drawing in a deep breath, he felt his chest heave against his uniform as an icy rope wrapped around his heart. The conference was just minutes away now. His mind practically imagined the new Citadel Council and representatives of various factions ushered into the hall. He could imagine the Council's reaction to the cluster of monolithic installations in a mutual orbit.

The doors rolled open silently as an attendant entered.

"General," she saluted, "they're waiting for you."

"Thank you," he said softly.

Running his fingers across the creases in his uniform, he pulled himself up from the chair, and entered the metal-marble furbished hallways. He followed the attendant as she lead him through a maze of checkpoints and guard posts before reaching the back entrance of the conference hall.

He exhaled, nodded at the two guards dressed in their dress whites, and stepped through the opening doors.

It was a hearing, supposedly. Though not as formal as a trial, Keyes still didn't expect many reporters or cameras in the hall. But there was. This definitely was a public lynching, he was being scapegoated. Someone needed to bear the blame of the Conspiracy and that someone was him. He could easily shift the blame to Parangosky, but the galaxy wouldn't buy it. He was the Director and thus he was the one responsible.

He knew that the UNSC wasn't going to oust him. But in a way, he wished they did. Cleaning house was the worst, especially in times of war.

Walking onto the stage, he sat down at the table next to Deputy Director Anna Greenfield and other Section Heads. Doctor Amanda Thorkais was the new Head of Section III, Lieutenant General Jacob Lenson was the Head of Section II and Vice Admiral Michael Sullivan was the head of Section I.

"This hearing is now in session," Chairman Samantha Reed announced.

Like many humans living in Coalition Space, Reed had undertaken the augmentations to retain her youth. She had long auburn hair and piercing green eyes. Keyes had heard she was a fair woman, and maybe she could help keep some kind of piece so he could make his case.

The hall began to quieten down as people shifted their attention to Reed. Keyes took the moment to look out over the assembly before him. On the stage were the Citadel Council, UEG Council and UNSC High Command, the audience were separated by two tiers. The first tier was for officials and the second tier was for reporters and those related to the accused or the one under examination. A myriad of species and factions had attended this hearing. It was definitely a PR stunt and also to allay a few concerns.

With enhanced eyes, Keyes cast his gaze out into the crowd. He could see his mother; she gave him a wave and a soft smile, just like Miri had done when she came to visit him at Exemplar.

"President Emily Taylor," Reed called.

From his reports and the current polls, Taylor held a doctorate in Law, Economics and Political Science. She seemed like a grounded person and did genuinely have people's best interests at heart â€" which would explain her fifty year office. Like Reed, she also had a youthful appearance which could be described as Elf-Like, with her jet black hair and ice blue eyes. Knowing that she would be the deciding factor, Keyes would have to world his responses carefully. His history with ONISAD and Section III would leave her wary of him.

Taylor shuffled her papers; her black business suit was immaculate and fitted her perfectly. She had a calm air around her, and as she turned to face Keyes, he couldn't help but feel the weight of the entire galaxy bearing down on him.

"General, before I begin," Taylor said. "You are aware of the consequences of not providing full transparency in this hearing could lead to a trial by court martial and possibly treason?"

It sounded more like a statement than a question.

"Of course," Keyes nodded, and added, "Doctor."

That was a title where they held common ground. It was his way of showing that they were equals. The brief pause in Emily's posture proved to him that she knew that.

"General, what did you know about Cerberus prior to taking office?" Taylor asked.

"Nothing. I was Head of Section Three," Keyes answered.

"And who is the current Head of Section Three?" the Turian Councillor, Quentius pressed. "Doctor Amanda Thorkais isn't it?"

"Nepotism, is she not a relative of yours?" Esheel, the Salarian Councillor added.

The Council was bearing down on him. Their own had been killed by Cerberus, and though they had little regard for their predecessors, stringing up Keyes was some popularity points for them â€" and someone had given them a tip. Essingdon preferred the late Councillors as they had been far more reasonable. Quentius was openly

against the unification of the Alliance and the UNSC, and expressed his displeasure at how fast Coalition forces had spread throughout the galaxy. Judging from the reports, Keyes knew that Esheel was just as equally ruthless and worked tirelessly to make the salarians top clandestine power once more.

"Doctor Amanda Thorkais has proven herself to be a capable scientist, and was the logical choice - as you salarians would have it," Keyes finished.

"Citadel Councillors, if you could refrain from asking questions at this time," Reed glared. "Madame President, if you could continue, please."

With a nod, Taylor returned her attention back to the ONI panel.

"General, could you please elaborate upon Cerberus. Surely you've run internal investigations into the matter."

"Of course," Keyes answered. "Investigators had discovered that Cerberus was an operation to forward Parangosky's agenda. Not ONI's, not the UNSC, not the UEG, but her agenda alone. We are still trying to determine her motives."

"Who were involved in this Operation?" Taylor asked.

"Confirmed are Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky, Admiral Serin Osman, former UNSC personnel and three ONISAD Operatives. Unconfirmed are other ten ONISAD personnel, one ODST Battalion, three Spartan-Four teams, and a number of private companies."

Murmurs spread across the hall, the unconfirmed strength of the Cerberus conspiracy was disturbing. Hundreds of people shifted uncomfortably in their seats as grim expressions spread across their faces.

"And where are they now?"

Keyes rubbed his right temple and took in a deep breath.

"Osman and Parangosky are on the run, I've tasked operatives to find her. The three ONISAD Operatives had been killed by Parangosky after they raided Omega. We have one PMC marked as a possible but we cannot confirm nor deny their involvement.

"General," the Asari Councillor, Irissa interrupted. "Was Cerberus a means to take over the galaxy and or assassinate the Council?"

All eyes were on Keyes. He should've put a scapegoat on stage in his place. Clean and simple since both he and his double could walk away without anyone getting killed. But to put it bluntly, shit happens.

"I cannot answer that Councillor, I am unaware of Cerberus's original prerogative. They were for Parangosky's agenda, that's all I can say I'm afraid."

Keyes shot Reed a quick look as to why she let the Asari Councillor interrupt in the first place. But Reed sent a look back to reassure

the Genera. Essingdon knew that the galaxy needed to have some kind of voice on this panel. Even if he found those voices to be coming from ruthless politicians.

"General Keyes," Taylor cleared her throat. "Can you shed light on the leak?"

"Please specify."

His voice was strained. It felt like someone was pouring liquid fire down his back.

"Spartan Programs."

He wondered if Taylor was a bit upset that a Senior Officer was Director of ONI and not a civilian. A question like that would drive ONI's image further into the ground. Sure people were aware of what the Program's true nature was, but outright acknowledging it would be breaking beyond the threshold.

"The Spartan Program was to produce Supersoldiers for the UNSC," Keyes stalled.

"General, may I remind you that you agreed to full transparency," Reed warned.

Scooting his chair closer to the table, he rested both elbows on the top and clasped his hands. He could feel fire licking at his neck. He really didn't want to do this.

"There were four Spartan Programs," Essingdon explained. "The first program was to create Supersoldiers to combat human insurrection. The second program was an expansion on the first, but was still experimental. It too was aimed at creating Supersoldiers to pacify the outer colonies."

Irissa raised the chime on her panel.

"Yes, Councillor?" Reed answered.

"A question for the General," the Asari said, flashing Keyes a predatory smirk.

This was not the time for politics, not while Coalition Forces took the brunt of the Flood assault.

"Of course, you may proceed."

"According to the rumours, the second and third programs _conscripted _children. Is that correct?" Irissa asked.

Keyes breathed in sharply as he shoulders sagged. He wasn't the one responsible for those programs, but it wouldn't matter. ONI would be the one taking the fall with him at the helm. These people didn't care about who was running the show and when. So long as they had someone to vent their frustrations and anger on, they wouldn't question anything.

"Yes," he answered.

Murmurs and whispered rolled across the amphitheatre.

"General, are you aware of the Laws that have been breached because of these programs?"

What was that Parangosky said? Keyes pondered. "_If you're going to practice divide and rule to maintain some sort of equilibrium at ONI, it's not enough to just set people against one another. The trick is to make sure that you get some useful work out of them as well. Otherwise just dispose of them and save yourself some time."_

Not only was that maxim applied in ONI, but Parangosky had applied it to the UNSC as a whole. He was her scapegoat. It didn't matter he that he didn't have to go on trial, all that mattered was that he shouldered the irrational blame of the galaxy.

"Madam President, I want to be clear on this," Keyes said, his voice dropping to a grave tone. "When these programs had been implemented, I wasn't even born yet. And at that time, the Insurrection were using nuclear attacks. When these programs were revealed to the public, I had just started my career with ONI as a Field Scientist attached to the Seventy-Fifth Rangers."

"But you are now the director of the organisation that created these programs," Irissa said with disgust. "You have even contributed your work to these programs as well."

The Asari Councillor had him, her hands were wrapped around his throat, and now she would squeeze. In all honesty, Keyes thought that the Council would be more in favour his side. Not necessarily sympathetic, but looking at it from a logical angle, Keyes sat at the helm of the most powerful clandestine organisation in history. He didn't expect the Council to fear him, but he was expecting them to try and gain his favour. Then again, this was purely a publicity stunt to redirect public outrage. Nothing was clean cut.

"Furthermore Cerberus was just a means for you to influence the galaxy to fulfil your own agenda. President Taylor and Fleet Admiral Hood, I must ask why this organisation was allowed to have so much free reign."

That was it. That was Irissa's ace in the hole. Keyes could literally feel billions if not trillions of eyes burning into his soul at the very moment. The hearing was being broadcasted across every news network within the Galaxy and Coalition space.

"Councillor, rest assured we are doing all we can," Taylor said.

"Clearly you're not doing enough," the Salarian Councillor snapped.

Keyes bristled and cleared his throat.

"Enough," Reed's voice rang. "I would ask if the Citadel Council hold off anymore inquires until this President Taylor finishes hers."

Reshuffling her files, Anna passed Essingdon a binder of operations

conducted to minimise Cerberus damage. He wondered how much good it would do; in fact, he wondered how much good this hearing would do at all. There was more than enough supporting evidence to suggest that the Coalition had planned to strike at the heart of the Council and take over the galaxy.

"General, what are you doing right now to find Parangosky?" Taylor asked.

Donnie noticed she didn't use the woman's rank but her last name instead.

"I've allocated as many assets as I can to find her. I've placed my most trusted and best man in charge of the manhunt for those linked to the Cerberus Conspiracy. She can't run forever."

Emily gave a curt nod before waving to an attendee. The young woman with red hair placed a file " or a stack " of papers in front of Keyes.

"Before we go onto that General, the UEG has drafted up a new directive which concerns you and your organisation."

"|

**Directive 3570MID**

The UNSC Office of Naval Intelligence (i.e. Military Intelligence Division) will be immediately broken down and reorganised accordingly. To remove the connotations associated with ONI, the UNSC Intelligence Branch will be primarily known by its formal name. And will answer directly to UNSC High Command instead of UNSC Naval Command.

_**ONISAD (Tactical Division)

>__Classified as a civilian division, ergo paramilitary, the structure of this division however, does not permit it as being classified as a civilian agency. Under all known law (including Council Space), any offensive action taken by ONISAD can be considered an act of war by the UNSC._

All ONISAD Political Actions Group Assets are to be immediately seized and transferred to the Intelligence Services Agency.

_ONISAD Special Operations Group Assets are to undergo intensive investigation by the Federal Investigations Agency and UEG Marshals. Depending on their operational history certain units may be reorganised or re-distributed.

>[Continued on page 4]

Advance Recon Group Assets will remain under MID jurisdiction.

Signal Corps will remain under MID jurisdiction whilst participating in joint operations with Cryptology Security Agency.

_**Section I

>__Section I has remained within parameters and is to remain untouched.

>[Continued on page 5]

**Section II

>__Cyber Warfare of the UNSC, however, due to tampering of communications and breaching of the Freedom of Speech Act, Section II is to be immediately disbanded. Military personnel's future postings will be decided by remaining ONI hierarchy with supervision from Federal Agents from FIA and Secret Service. Civilian personnel will be transferred to the Cryptology Security Agency.

>[Continued on page 94]

**Section III

>__Section III has produced a number of invaluable technology and research for the UNSC in the war against the Covenant. However, recently acquired reports from Internal Affairs have shown that the brutal competition between cells has even lead to assassinations of fellow team leads. Further investigation will be required. Section III will be created into a separate entity; UNSC Defence Research Agency. However, certain personnel may be relocated to ISA or MID.

>[Continued on page 167]

**Assets

>__SkySentry (Section II) â€" reallocated to CSA
>Prowler Fleets â€" MID jurisdiction
[Continued on page 236]_

â€|

Organisation dissemination, Keyes had been familiar with it. He'd already seen the signs when he had become Section III Chief. After the two wars, the public was concerned about the sheer amount of unchallenged power ONI held. For the most part, they were correct. ONI was overflowing with so much power that an incredible amount of their resources was devoted to fighting themselves.

Essingdon had hoped that under his leadership, he could've created four separate entities within ONI and have them answer to the ONI Command Echelon, UNSC High Command and the Inner Cabinet of the UEG. But he had to be realistic. He was in command of a sinking ship. Parangosly and Osman's reign had done far too much damage, and the recent conspiracies had broken whatever hold ONI had left.

The directive was quite simple. It reminded him of the history books he had read about the Intelligence Organisations of the USA and other Commonwealth Powers. There was far too much power under one throne.

ONI's Tactical Division was going to be reorganised and redistributed, that much was clear. As ONI's formal name suggested, Military Intelligence Division, ONI was supposed to provide battlefield intelligence and battlefield intelligence alone.

He had a feeling that his tenure as Director wouldn't last any longer. Chances were, the higher authorities of the UNSC and the UEG were finding another suitable position for him. His scientific brilliance made him suitable for the UNSC Defence Research Agency, but there were people who were just as talented as he was, and more than able to take the job.

Then again, he could become the Chief of the MID, but what would that do? His strongest points were in his abilities to make decisions that would influence future battle outcomes, not play admin. Of course he'd still have ONI's primary assets at his fingertips, but without ONISAD (i.e. Arcani), his effectiveness would be severely diminished.

He needed a private audience with Taylor. Looking back up at the board, he could see the directors of various agencies, virtually licking their lips at the prospects of getting their hands on ONISAD's best assets.

His eyes flicked back to the pages. The representatives for other Coalition Species were very quiet. There was no denying that ONI had backstabbed them during the interlude between the two wars.

Out of respect for Keyes, they said nothing.

â€|

_**Operational Parameters

>__MID will now only undertake operations that are vital to maintaining UNSC Military supremacy through any means necessary.__

â€|

Essingdon smiled at that sentence. It offered him enough flexibility to maintain MID's precision and thus overall effectiveness. This was his chance to rebuild the organisation from the ground up.

"Is there anything else?" Keyes asked.

"There will be a twenty minute break before the hearing continues," Reed concluded.

XXxxXX

ABOARD UNSC **_NIGHTWALKER**_**
>IN ORBIT OF GREATER ARK

Company loyalty, as people once called it. A sincere dedication to a conglomerate. For the vast majority of his life, men and women like Adrian had dedicated endless hours and sleepless nights in the service of forwarding ONI's interests and in turn, the UNSC and UEG agenda. He was both the product and a shaper of the powerful intelligence organisation.

But upon watching the galactic wide hearing, he felt his hard work and the hard work of others, teeter on the precipice of destruction. Parangosky's time as Director had undone the work of her predecessors. She had pitted cell against cell, agent against agent. In a time of war, she had turned ONI into splinters without a unified goal.

Many in administration and the command hierarchy of ONI hated her. She was manipulative and hypocritical without purpose. She had burned countless operatives, tasking them to hunt one another down. Nearing the - final days of the Human-Covenant War, Section III was almost in ruins. Osman was no better; she continued on Parangosky's reign of

hell and killed anyone who got in her way.

Then came the break everyone had hoped for – Osman stepping down from leadership and allowing a civilian Director to take over. Under his leadership, David Gordon restructured ONI and rewrote protocols to ensure maximum productivity without cells attacking one another. An organisation couldn't survive if there was conflict within, and Parangosky's policies had drawn the attention of the UEG Council to the extent that the President Doctor Ruth Charet was prepared to ground and gut all of ONI's Operations.

The move to have a civilian director had been purely a PR stunt to maintain ONI's power at first, but it turned out to work for the best. Adrian had been a part of the rebuilding process, as Section Zero Agent, he answered to UNSC High Command and the UEG.

Standing up from his leather chair, he made his way through the halls and entered the hangar bay. Upon reaching his unmarked civilian shuttle, the side door opened – its sensors having picked up the Operative's tag.

"Where are you going?" John asked.

Turning around, Chen saw the Spartan-II lean against a nearby bulkhead with both arms folded.

"Getting something to eat," Adrian answered.

John glanced in the direction of the kitchen, then back at Chen.

"Okay, and I'm getting a suit as well," Adrian sighed.

"I'm driving then," the Spartan said, leaving no room for argument.

"That means you're paying for lunch too."

"Deal."

Entering the cockpit of the shuttle, Adrian sat down in the co-pilot seat and fastened his buckle.

"Systems functional, and engines online," John said, his fingers dancing across the controls. "Here we go."

The craft slowly climbed.

"_Incoming transmission. Type; E-Conference_" a disembodied female voice chimed. "_Caller ID; Hera."_

"Patch it through," Adrian ordered.

A small aperture descended from a port on the cabin ceiling. It descended until it reached halfway, before projecting a curving holographic widescreen in front of Chen.

"_Identification and challenge code in, please,"_ a disembodied female voice demanded.

"Argus Foxtrot-Eight-Niner, code in Templar's Keep."

"_Who are you with, Adrian?"_ a clear female voice rang.

Challenge ID response was implemented in the hopes that two parties could send each other coded messages whilst under duress of any kind. _Templar's Keep_ was Chen's code that he was in trusted company.

The video feed adjusted and revealed a woman with short jet black hair, sapphire blue eyes and a stern expression on her even features. Behind her was a view of the Greater Ark's night skyline and by the windows was the UEG flag.

"Taylorâ€¦ always a pleasure," Chen deadpanned.

"_We can't risk a compromise,"_ Taylor said gravely._ "Not after what's happened."_

"I have a trusted man with me," Adrian sighed.

"_This better not be Keyes,"_ the President frowned.

"Close but noâ€¦"

"_Just tell me."_

Adrian spun the camera to face the pilot seat.

"Et voila, le Master Chief."

Taylor sighed audibly over the feed.

"We don't have time for this bullshitâ€¦ what's your MO?"

"Lunch," John answered.

Adrian let a small smile curl across his lips. Taylor however, held a grim expression and so did the rest of her cabinet.

"Well at this hourâ€¦ dinner," Chen shrugged.

"I need a straight answer," Taylor gritted.

The Operative looked at the President dead in the eye.

"What do you think? You've gutted us," Adrian retorted.

There was a pause on the other end. Emily's expression softened.

"Just be carefulâ€¦ "

The transmission ended as a message flashed on screen. Adrian turned off the projector and gazed out at the installation below.

"How long have you been with Internal Affairs?" John asked.

"Two days prior to augmentation," Adrian answered.

"Twenty-five-fifty-three?"

Chen nodded.

"Halseyâ€¦ why wasn't that reported?"

Adrian winced. He considered that to be one of the greatest failures in his career. With ONI, nothing was ever official, and because Chen was with Internal Affairs, he had near unprecedented access to most of ONI's dirty secrets. Between Essingdon and Adrian, neither acknowledged the latter's involvement with Section Zero, it was just assumed considering the amount of information Chen would shift to Keyes.

"Parangosky had too much damning evidence at the time. I told Hood, and by the time we could actually arrest her, she had a solid alibi."

"You arrested her?"

"No. We couldn't. Otherwise she would suspect something. But I managed to convince Taylor to enact a Bill that would order Agency Directors to be rotated through."

"She covered her tracks then," John concluded.

"Yes, and with her contingency vendettas, she had us by the balls."

The shuttle eased left and past the first line of orbital weapons. Flight consoles retracted into the dashboard as John relinquished control over to the autopilot, to guide the craft to the landing pad.

They needed time to prepare for the mission.

In an age of technological advancement and brilliance, subterfuge became easier to conceal. Within the stores of the shuttle, were equipment made for urban incursions and onsite surveillance â€" that is human intelligence gathering.

Contact lenses with nano-tech for a Heads-Up-Display, sub-dermal radios which used vibrations to process data and turn it into sound that only the user could hear, and mutual cloud computing between the TACPAD and smartphone. In order to minimise counter-hacking risks, MID Operatives (formerly ONI) would have physical kill switches which would allow them to disappear off grid. Every signal would be via the TACPAD or smartphone.

It was technology like this which made former ONI Operatives a force to be reckoned with. Their doctrine focused on self-initiative and extremely limited support. At a moment's notice they could strike with terrifying force and vanish without a trace. It was also another reason to why John and Adrian had to work quickly. There were too many ONISAD Cells still unaccounted for. The more he dug, the more unsanctioned Generation-1 teams he found.

Moving up to the faucets, the two gently inserted the contact lenses. They needed a HUD and they needed to change their eye colour to brown. Luminous blue had a habit of blowing an operative's cover.

Next was the re-sync of all equipment to the TACPAD and smartphone.

The model the two were using mimicked a civilian design, and bore the logo of a well-known company. The TACPADS took after civilian designs of high-end smart watches, and bore a traditional elegant design similar to expensive watches available during the early 21st century.

Next were the clothes, both going for a smart casual look, since it was the early spring weekend. They wore dress shirts, toughened trousers and sturdy smart casual shoes. To add to the authenticity of their civilian look, both had their sleeves rolled up to the elbows, whilst also remaining conscious of the fact to roll up the sleeves of their undersuits to above the elbow.

The undersuit was another marvel of UNSC technology. Composed of nanofibers and maintained by nanites, these suits helped regulate body temperature, whilst masking heat signatures. Furthermore, it contained super micro-magnetic coils in its carbon weave which allowed light to be bent around the user. Being built on the concept of smart cloth technology, the suits could instantly harden and reduce ballistic damage.

Still it never hurt to have some more body armour on hand, which was why Adrian packed components of the new SenOps Mark I Infiltration Suit into the shuttle.

"I'm good to go," John waved.

"Then let's go," Adrian answered.

Entering a few commands onto the console, the craft door opened and a ramp descended onto the ground. With each man pulling his respective luggage bag, they made their way through the VIP pathways of the airport, and walked towards the rental dealership.

If there was something Adrian loved about working in an urban or metropolitan area, it was that there was banking. Monetary funds he could access.

MID finance weren't going to miss a few extra hundred dollars for a luxury SUV rental. Paying the fee and filing out the paperwork, the two men were headed down into the metropolitan area of GA, specifically New Hammond, and the centre of human businesses and home to some of the most influential people.

â€|**

>WESTSHORE
NEW HAMMOND**

Lunch, that one period in a person's busy day, where they could stop, take a break and sit down to have something to eat. Regardless of a person's occupation, everyone preferred to eat undisturbed and in the company of friends. Adrian was no exception, nor was John. Throughout the years of fighting or hunting insurrectionist cells, the two rarely had the opportunity to stop and have a break, at all. There were either sleeping or eating on the move, or doing neither at all.

So whenever the opportunity to have a full course meal without any

disruption arose, Adrian usually went all out on the food. He would generally pick foods that could only be enjoyed when hot, as opposed to the relatively fine meals that could be enjoyed cold. John wasn't that picky however.

Easing the SUV into a parallel parking spot, the two then stepped out of the vehicle and surveyed the district. It was located a few kilometres away from the business district, perched in an area populated by the wealthy.

There was a place Adrian had in mind, it served the decadent Wagyu beef that he loved, and catered to John's love for lamb. It also served as an excellent spot to observe Lenard Williams, a name coughed up by Vasili during his interrogation. After a quick online search, a specific reservation was placed for a table by the window overlooking the harbour.

Climbing a short flight of stairs, the two were greeted by a waitress. Judging by the slight nuances in behaviour and certain involuntarily human responses, Adrian concluded that she was a living person and not an android.

"Hello, sir," she greeted with a warm smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Table for two, under the reservation of Clarence Yun," Chen answered.

Her emerald eyes quickly flickered down to the podium.

"Of course, Mister Yun," she said, stepping out from the podium. "This way please."

She led the two through the main dining area and up onto an elevated platform. Every possible escape and entrance route was noted and burned into memory. Upon reaching a reserved table, John chose the seat which overlooked the entrance and main area, while Adrian chose the seat facing the kitchen.

"Any drinks, for the time being, gentlemen?" the waitress asked.

"Glass of garrafeira port," John ordered.

"I'll have a glass of sarsaparilla," Adrian added.

It had been awhile since he had the archaic drink, but there was nothing like the classics.

"Certainly," the waitress gave a curt bow and left.

"Nice place," the Spartan-II said, making short conversation.

"Found it while I was on breakâ€¦ they serve wagyu beef."

Opening up the leather bound menu, John read the pages for anything interesting. He had an affinity for lamb, and usually couldn't pass up the opportunity to have it. His eyes settled on lamb rack marinated in herbs and white wine.

"You know what you're getting?" Adrian asked.

"Yes," he answered.

The waitress returned a short moment later with the mentioned drinks.

"What would you like to order for today, gentlemen?" she asked.

"I'll have the Turkish lamb rack marinated in white wine and oregano, please," he said.

"Certainly," she then turned to Adrian. "And you, sir?"

"I'll have the Tasmanian wagyu steak marinated in soy sauce and coriander relish, please."

"Of course, sir," the waitress said as she took the menus away. "Anything else?"

"That'll be all for now, thank you."

John and Adrian continued to make small talk, waiting for the food to arrive, while surveying Williams's estate down on the beaches. Both men carefully slid their smartphones out of their pockets and angled the camera's to look upon the house, perched a two hundred and eight metres away.

"Semi-trailer," Adrian muttered.

A partially transparent feed popped up onto John's HUD. He pressed a control on his watch to open up the link. Industrial commercial freighters, usually a frequent due to the fact they shipped luxury items and provided advertisement, but having one of those vehicles stop outside an estate owned by Lenard Williams was considered odd.

"Performing a scan," Chen whispered.

Schematics of the vehicle appeared.

"Same dimensional match as First foundâ€¦| what's it doing here?"

A slightly audible sound of Adrian drawing in breath drew John's attention, the Spartan-II saw the Arcani roll his jaw slightly before clenching it.

"Something wrong?" the Chief asked.

He wasn't referring to the readout. Call it a hunch or a Spook's intuition, something just felt wrong.

"Etrius's family lives here, in the house with the yacht docked on front of it."

"Greystoneâ€¦| right?"

Adrian nodded.

Looking over to the Mediterranean styled house, John could see outlines of a family barbeque on the beach.

A small click from his HUD brought John's attention back to the readout schematics.

"Shit, the truck's getting a signal," Chen whispered.

"Could be a bouncing signal," John said, analysing the readings.

"It's not."

The ground shook, glass shattered. John hissed in pain as shards glanced off his skin, and an invisible wall hurling him through the air. He felt his back hit something, a table. The timber splintered under his weight and did little to stop his momentum. He kept rolling until his chest slammed into a platform, knocking the wind out of him.

Blinking away the dots swarming his vision, he looked back to where he was sitting. The blast had thrown him back to the entrance. A figure emerged from his right, rushing towards him.

"John! You alright?" Chen asked, crouching down beside him.

Their clothes were covered in soot and slightly tattered in a few places.

"I'm good," the Spartan answered, pulling himself up. "Did you get the phones?"

"I got them," Adrian nodded, handing John his device. "C'mon, we need to get to the site."

****XXxxxXX****

****MAIN WING ENTRANCE**

>THE DAVID GORDON FACILITY FOR MILITARY INTELLIGENCE**

>MILITARY INTELLIGENCE DIVISION HEADQUARTERS**

>OAKTON**

>GREATER ARK****

After lengthy negotiations with other Directors and Senators, Keyes had finally come to an agreement regarding the future of ONI. The organisation would be rebranded into the Military Intelligence Division, and would keep its naval fleet as well as Arcani Assets. Section II and Section III would be redistributed to Cryptology Security Agency and UNSC Research Defence Agency, respectively.

Since the Cerberus Conspiracy, other directors had increased their efforts on either gaining more influence in the intelligence community, or remove ONI's power. Most were successful in their endeavours. The newly formed MID would perform the original duties of ONI's Section I and ONISAD-SOG.

Its Clandestine Services, now branded as MID's Sensitive Operations

Group. The operatives nicknamed _Sen Ops_.

Walking through the Forbidden City, Keyes could already see the aesthetic changes to the facility. The first and foremost was that the sign engraved with; _Now entering the Forbidden City_, was replaced with; _Welcome to the David Gordon Facility for Military Intelligence_ and right below was _Military Intelligence Division Headquarters_. Next was the changes to the logo, the original all-seeing eye and the pyramid was enough to instil fear, and had too many negative opinions tied to it. MID's new seal was a kiteshield, adorned with stars above it, and olive branches at its bottom section. Within the shield were a number of smaller stars forming the faint silhouette of an iris against the backdrop of an eagle with its wings outstretched " the wingspan outstretching the width of the shield.

It was a seal that Keyes felt held the air of idealism, and perseverance to protect Coalition lives at all cost. But how long would it take before MID's leadership, to fall back into old habits? Essingdon knew he wasn't above that, he wasn't above using dirty tactics. Being Head of Section III didn't mean that he toured labs all day, no, he had to oversee programs like Arcani. His true fear was for MID leadership to revert back to ONI's style of using lethal force with impunity.

Entering the main entrance, Essingdon panned his eyes along the staircase leading into the atrium. It was adorned with a waterfall and garden on either side, reminiscent of a certain airport where he made frequent transit flights.

"They really want to remove ONI, huh?" Anna commented dryly, as they walked up the backlit glass staircase.

Reaching the upper floor, Essingdon nodded his head in admiration.

"Went all out on with the renovations," he added.

The walkway was like a cone, gradually expanding outwards until it reached the main atrium. Flanking both sides were balconies, no doubt leading into office areas. Beneath the mezzanine were tailored monitors stretching along the walls, providing news updates on stock, current bulletins and general campus news.

Keyes noticed that the employees looking at the monitors were standing on glass panels, stretched over an aquarium. That kind of interior design was usually reserved for seaside metropolitan resorts or entertainment corporations. The central pathway he was on, was an ember tan marble, which softened the sunlight through the glass ceiling.

Upon entering the main foyer, Essingdon could see the atrium stretched up to a few floors, allowing beautiful oaks to grow within the building. Reception desks were stationed outside the entrance wings, and elevators were contained within large spire containing linked aquariums. In the centre of the foyer was another water feature with a statue of the MID's seal.

"I get the feeling that all this water is to remind us that we were once navy," Greenfield joked.

"You're not the only one getting that vibe," Keyes agreed.

Parting ways for the respective offices, Essingdon knew that there was a safeguard in that measure. If either one of their office was attacked, the other could escape and continue the line of succession. Using the lifts, Keyes took the time to identify every aquatic species placed inside the expansive fish tank. There was a lot more greenery and water than the last time he was here. The large oaks and the atrium's general layout had been around since the Forbidden City was built, but the aquarium, additional gardens and aesthetic shift was new.

The elevator doors parted open with a soft chime. Keyes stepped into a timber floored hallway with ceiling accents combined with soft backlighting. There was a lot more curvature in the new design, which was refreshing " a rich amalgamation of timber, metal, marble and glass.

There were also a number of security checkpoints with very large closets on either side, clearly containing combat drones in case of an emergency breach.

At least there's no security delay, Keyes thought cheerily.

He could still remember the days when he had to arrive at work an hour early so that he could get through security and make it to his meetings on time.

Upon reaching his office, he looked at the bookshelves and monitors that lined the walls. On the ceiling above his desk, was a high-definition swivel-mounted holo-projector. In front of his desk were two leather armchairs matching the white carpet floor, and to the right was another door. Opening the door, he found himself looking at a kitchenette and a master bedroom suite.

Looks like they want me to stay here for a while" and fix everything.

Taking of his jacket, he hanged it on the back of his chair, and sat down. He turned on his computer screen and prepared for work. His fingers danced along the mechanical keyboard as he entered in new commands for his Operatives.

Some people preferred to be plugged into a system via their neural lace, but that did leave them vulnerable to hacking. Protocol dictated that an Agency Head would have to do things the _manual_ way.

There was a chime over the PA, bringing Keyes out of his work.

"_Anna Greenfield requests that you turn on the news to channel eight, there's been an incident in New Hammond."_

Via his tacpad, Essingdon turned on the overhead projector, and saw a large screen materialise in front of him.

"_At one o'clock local time, a powerful explosion ripped through Westshore at New Hammond, killing countless dozens. As you can see

here, the shockwave was powerful enough to hit Westshore Outlook Restaurant, killing a child and injuring many more. We do not know

The reporter stopped talking as a deep guttural howl rolled across the burnt landscape. The camera focused on a humanoid figure with massive tendrils limping out of the smoke.

"_Flood! Take it down!" a male voice barked._

Lances of blue stabbed through the target, reducing it to glowing ash. This time the containment teams had been ready. Keyes breathed a sigh of relief as he saw armoured soldiers and drones advance on ground zero, weapons humming.

He heard his office doors open, and the sound of heels padding across the carpet.

"Donnie," Greenfield called.

"Yes?"

"We got reports from our Cyber Warfare Section and the CSA saying that a number of virtual reality servers have crashed."

"Shit," Essingdon hissed.

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**Channel 34 GABNN transcript**

**Reporter Francis Wilbur:** For as long as empires existed, so have war machines, and espionage. ONI had humble beginnings, unifying all of Earth's Intelligence Organisations into one conglomerate. Their primary goal was to provide intelligence to UNSC Forces and CMA about Insurrectionist attacks. However, as time went on, ONI was reorganised into sections to fulfil its overall clandestine goals. This organisation's power grew to the point where people began to fear speaking out against its command hierarchy._

People began to question ONI's motives of sanctioned assassinations against civilians of the UEG and allied leaders. The organisation housed a section for intelligence gathering, another section for communication monitoring, and another for top secret programs.

It is of no doubt that ONI had produced some of the most invaluable assets in the fight against the Covenant, despite their inhumane beginnings.

But all those resources and power under one group of people or person would be far more than enough to raise concerns. ONI was virtually unchallenged and unchecked by anyone else in the Intelligence Community, why? Because they were the only ones.

This lead to massive internal conflicts however, as cells began to undermine and betray one another, leading the organisation to use its resources to fight amongst itself.

_After the UEG was restored to power, as a gesture of goodwill, UNSC High Command decided to allow a larger civilian influence within ONI,

and allow it to have its first civilian director, David Gordon. Under David Gordon's leadership, he restructured the organisation for better work efficiency, and opened new divisions to allow ONI to tackle insurrectionist and terrorist threats. He retired after a decade of service and allowed former director, Admiral Serin Osman to return to office, and soon after, Admiral Margaret Parangosky._

When the Coalition returned to the Milky Way, strife began to stir in ONI once more, as the sensitive files were uncovered. The nature of the Spartan Programs and the Arcani Program was revealed, and shocked the public. General polls showed a massive public preference for Admiral Serin Osman, a supposed whistleblower, unable to tolerate the dark nature of the organisation for any longer.

Negative criticism was immediately directed towards General Essingdon Keyes, genius prodigy of Doctor Catherine Halsey and Captain Jacob Keyes. But upon deeper investigation, it was discovered the Admiral Osman was a Spartan-II washout, which begs the question of her true motives behind the exposure, and why she waited so long.

Realising the dangers that ONI posed a few decades earlier, the UEG created several agencies to balance ONI's sphere of influence and power. The independent Intelligence Services Agency, and Cryptology Security Agency, UNSC Defence Research Agency, and Federal Investigations Agency.

The two independent intelligence organisations were to balance ONI's Section I and II respectively, while UNSC DRA would work alongside with Section III. The FIA would answer to the Department of Justice, and investigate all the aforementioned agencies for corruption.

But after the dissolution of ONI, these agencies received new manpower, and in the void left behind by the powerful organisation, the Military Intelligence Division rose to fill the gap. So what is the role of this new organisation? And how would it differ from the others?

Well, to describe the similarities and differences would be like trying to accurately describe the differences in the chocolate manufacture by different companies. Their goals and operations overlap, and hence they would work in conjunction with one another.

Officially, MID would collect intelligence data that would evaluate insurrectionist threats, while ISA would evaluate terrorist threats. Once again, accurately defining the similarities and differences of insurrectionists and terrorist is like defining the differences in chocolate from different producers.

And that is how we would define all these agencies in the intelligence community, by defining their end goals and the people behind them.

_To shed light on MID's future objectives, the organisation aims to provide intelligence and clandestine services that would aid UNSC operations, and inform UEG policy makers. Obviously, it's near identical to its independent counterpart, the

ISA._

****XXxxXX****

62. Shattered Earth

****A/N:** Remember when this domain had less than one hundred stories? Pepperidge Farm does.**

****I** would also like to mention that I've made a slight [cough â€" huge â€" cough] error with Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood. It is supposed to be Admiral etc., for the most part right up until the war, where he would receive Fleet Admiral. Sorry for any confusion this may have caused anyone.**

****Also,** if the review you leave requires me to answer something (i.e. it has a question or it is something that voices your concerns and/or queries, please leave do under an account so I can personally explain things to you).**

MahnattanProject******, you seem to have a few of my stories mixed up, none of them are really related or are canon.**

â€|

****I** should also get out of the habit of appropriating things before a trilogy endsâ€| Spoiler alertâ€| the Greater Ark was destroyedâ€| certain Spartan-IVs killed. Requiem destroyed, whereas I wrote the thing for still being around.**

****In **_**Lost Legacy**_****, Requiem is still chilling (but won't be mentioned any further because it is irrelevant to the plot), dead Spartan-IVs will remain alive (even though they have been killed off in canon) for now, and Greater Ark shall assumed to be rebuilt and relocated.**

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[Unsanctioned by UNSC HIGHCOM] Directive-P067/A UNSC Intelligence Emergency Powers Act, 2553****

_A1 â€" Navigational Data Purge**
>_All sleeper cells within Insurrectionist settlements â€" or any other settlements outside the territories of Earth and her Colonies â€" must purge all navigation data._

A2 â€" Discovered secessionist settlement****
>If a secessionist settlement is discovered â€" well behind Covenant space or any territories fallen to Covenant invasion â€" and is determined to be controlled by Insurrectionists, then Operatives are granted Emergency Authorisation to neutralise the settlement through any means necessary.

Addendum: Fundamentalist colonies usually possess little threat, however cults branching off from faiths that have existed before the Common Era are more inclined to commit mass suicide rather than attack Earth and her Colonies. Ignore these settlements.

_A3 â€" Covenant Refugees and raised threat levels**

>__Influx of Covenant refugees; Due to the recent increase in extra-terrestrial refugees on Earth, all able Operatives must be on standby at all times to respond to any threat. Counter-measures are on standby.__

**A4 â€" ONI Command shift or abolishment**

>In the event that Operatives no longer receive orders from Command, or Command is assumed to be compromised, Operatives are possibly considered to be traitors of the state. In that event, Operatives must carry out predetermined objectives unless the Handler and Operations Manager issues a specific challenge ID.

_**A5 â€" Fall of Man

>__If UEG Council has been defeated by another nation or faction, Operatives are to conduct guerrilla warfare and instigate an insurrection.__

_**A6 â€" UEG Sovereignty and Stability

>__In the event that another nation is discovered, Operatives must provide information that would lead to strategic placements of contingency assets to ensure the sovereignty and stability of humanity.__

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**WESTSHORE, NEW HAMMOND

>GREATER ARK

They had been quick to leave the restaurant, and after having retrieved their bags, the two used the public restrooms to attach light combat armour and a combat hood outfitted with powerful and compact array of sensors inbuilt into the tactical visor.

John had expected a quick journey down to the epicentre, but his hopes of accomplishing soon disappeared after witnessing the carnage. Dozens of civilians in the streets had been lacerated by shattered glass.

Heading down a staircase branching off from the street and in between to shopfronts, the two men entered a courtyard. Devastation was minimal; most of the patrons were rooted to their chairs. Adrian made a first pan of the area, before sprinting to the other side while John covered him. Certain that there were no hostiles in the vicinity, John ran across the paved pathway, dropped to his knees and skidded to a halt beside the Operative.

"What's going on?" the Spartan heard some of them whisper.

"Find cover, quickly," a father urged his family.

With an uplink to existing MID surveillance assets, the Chief used his HUD to plot a path to the epicentre.

"Car!" Chen roared.

A black SUV ploughed onto the streets from behind him, coming to a skidding halt at the hilltop. There was no noise from the engine, just pure silence. The heavy machine gun spooled to life, filling the air with ozone and savage power. John threw himself behind a parked

luxury car, before moving back onto the boulevard and moving down the line.

Civilians screamed running back into the storefronts. Parents wrapped their arms around their children, huddling behind benches.

The gunner kept a close bead on him, with lances of energy boiling away concrete and metal. Stray rounds splashed onto the bushes, setting the gardens alight.

Leaning slightly out of cover, John aimed at the turret and squeezed. Wispy lances leapt from the barrel and struck forth, but were stopped by a ghostly blue barrier.

He noticed that all the firepower was directed at him. He didn't even register Adrian's _lack_ of COM chatter. Easing back behind the cover of a van, John looked at the Operative's last known position. He saw a pair of sturdy walking shoes and crÃ"me pants jutting out from behind a parked car.

"Yun!" John bellowed, using the alias.

People had a habit of remembering the most obscure detail, and despite the hellish noise, training forced him to never use personal names in the field.

"Answer â€" _huk_!"

An iron fist slammed into the base of his skull, the road rushing up to meet him. Dots swarmed his vision as the Chief quickly rolled onto his back, narrowly dodging a lance of energy. He could feel the heat from the discharge wash over his face, but the hood was there to protect him.

Pulling himself back up, he fired back at the source â€" a man on the balcony. Two rounds caught the assailant in the chest, but the third missed. Before John could rectify, the sniper had already retreated.

The sharpshooter's accuracy was sloppy.

Eyeing an alcove between two large garden benches, John made a mad dash for the other side of the road, the air rushing past him and footsteps echoing across the courtyard. Enemy fire bit at his heels and melted the asphalt.

A low hiss escaped his lips, one of rounds hammered into his left shoulder. The alarm blared in his headset; vitals showing third degree burns and contusions.

Ignoring the pain, he slid behind the pots and rolled into an outdoor eating area. Gradually his shields recharged. The turret controller was a persistent bastard, constantly firing in short bursts. Flakes of molten concrete were spat into the air, peppering the Spartan's clothing.

John looked around for anything of use â€" nothing. There weren't even any grenades of any kind on his harness. The Spartan scolded himself for being so woefully under prepared, but this was a recon op, not an offensive one.

The people inside the caf  were huddling behind whatever shelter they could find, some looking at him with fear and awe. He raised his hand, gesturing for them to stay down. Though it was the obvious thing for them to do, the simple movement did wonders for public relations and trust.

His ears filled with the sound of crackling energy and hissing metal. Enemy fire increased intensity, chewing away at what meagre protection the garden box and table offered.

Pulling himself up, he sprinted across the boulevard of caf s as rounds splashed and crackled all around him. It was like running through a haywire electrical substation. Sparks were flying everywhere, stinging at his exposed skin and leaving pinpricks of black on his clothes. Upon reaching a stairway, he leapt down, landed and rolled across the tiled surface of another courtyard.

This one was mostly empty, with patrons from the stores having left the moment they heard the gunfire. Barrelling past a boutique storefront, John rounded the corner, entered the alleyway, and exited onto the parallel street.

He knew he left Adrian behind, but it was either that or die. Whoever was behind this, they knew how to manipulate the flow of battle.

Swinging around the block and running through an alleyway, he found himself facing the technical once more. The gun spooled up as it spun to bear, and unleashed an unforgiving amount of hellish fire.

Tiles, furniture and glass melted, smoke curling up from the blackened heap. John rolled to hide behind a parallel-parked car, and felt sparks rain down on him. He looked around the streets; there were a number of pile-ups from panicked civilians. He could use that to his advantage, but there could still be someone in the cars.

Swearing silently, he opted to take a chance. Digging in his heels, he shot towards a rear-end crash at the centre of the street and made his way up closer to the technical.

But the crew seemed to know what he was planning and quickly backed the SUV to a safer distance, and resumed firing.

Bolts splashed onto the car hulls, punching through the windows and sending sparks into the air. John swore inwardly as he felt the heat of a bolt pass his arm. Shots came from the alleyway. Agents were closing in all around.

They got him, his inner voice growled.

Leaning slightly out of cover, he fired back, scoring a hit on one of the black armoured assailants. The round struck the man dead centre, but his shields flared to life and saved him.

These men were clearly not contractors. Their resources, stature and tactics resembled ONISAD. He didn't know why they were here though, and that was the dangerous part. ONI never revealed themselves unless necessary. Their tactical teams' kill counts were amongst the lowest

in the entire Special Forces community, but their strategic effects were among the most devastating.

They weren't probably here to kill. The prospect of that idea became more plausible as each second the firefight dragged on. It was a smash and grab the Spartan concluded.

Hugging the cover of the cars, John managed to position himself for a direct line of fire into the alley. Lying prone, he squeezed the trigger and blanketed the entire area. A number of shields flared, but the operatives reacted fast enough to retreat back into the safety of cover.

More rounds streaked towards him. Some struck the hull of his cover from an elevated angle, others smashing the pavement and leaving behind streaks of black. Retreating into a crouching stance, the Spartan used his optics to scan the roof. EM wave scans didn't pick up anything, most likely because the climbers were using cloak. He switched to sonarâ€¦| _bingo_.

Two hostile outlines appeared on the roof â€" as well as a number of civilians. Every time their rifles flared, a section of their cloak dropped and wavered. Bringing his gun to bear on the head, John fired a full burst.

The shields failed, and a head snapped back violently, bringing the rest of the body down. The rooftop shooter fell back, presumably dead.

"Now where's your buddy," John growled.

His goggles picked up another signature; second floor balcony of the apartment complex. A number of people were inside the lounge room, but he could make the shot. The operative entered the kitchen and set up his firing position near the window.

John quickly put an end to his plans, scoring a hit on the assailant's rifle and shoulder. Moments later, he could hear the sirens in the distance. The assault team quickly backed up and sped out of the area. Seeing their retreating signatures, the Spartan decided to make his way up to the rooftop.

They're late, he thought. Homeguard was already onsite, which meant the local police should've been able to divert to his area.

Vaulting over the barriers, his feet landed with a soft thud onto the concrete slabs. Scanning the area, he could see a number of solar panels and luxury items that made the area a nice retreat for the apartment owners. There were a number of people here, enjoying the hot tubs and the pools. Judging by the amount of balloons and cake, this was a birthday party.

John frowned inwardly. With the heat of the moment gone, he was analysing the situation. The bomb attack happened less than a half our ago. Law Enforcement would've created a perimeter and evacuate local areas to allow the containment teams to do their work. However, throughout the whole firefight, he had not seen any sign of the police come in. And the Flood was suspiciously slow in expanding.

As he neared the body of the operative, he had killed, John examined

the armour carefully " or what was left of it. The burnt out husk was unidentifiable. But he could tell that the weapon of choice was an M770 SASR. Sidearm was an FR79. These types of weapons weren't something easily found on the black market.

Looking back at the large gathering of people, most starred at him in shock and awe, even without his armour, John was a very intimidating person.

They shouldn't be here, the Spartan reasoned.

Rationality in human behaviour, usually dictated that a person make their way to the nearest and safest shelter. However under duress, the ability to judge is adversely affected. These patrons should've left the cafÃ©s minutes ago. But they had chosen to stay, maybe the explosion had stunned them into disbelief, unable to comprehend that their bubble of relative peace for the past millennium had been broken.

"Remain calm, the police will be here shortly," he said to the people.

Walking through the eating area, he caught the scent of burnt meat on the barbeque, and chlorine in the pool. He made his way to the other side of the roof where he could get a direct line of sight on the restaurant and Adrian's last known position. As he suspected, Chen was missing.

He doubted the man was dead. If they wanted him dead, they would've blown up the restaurant and left before anyone knew what had happened.

Looking back at the body, he felt a slight pang of guilt slowly encroach on the bottom of his heart. Ever since the war between Humanity and the Covenant began, John became increasingly uncomfortable pulling the trigger on another human. There was just something_ wrong_ about it.

Adrian had suggested that the Spartan had become so accustomed to killing Covenant soldiers to protect human life, that even killing Insurrectionist went against everything he stood for. Maybe he was nearing his end. Chen certainly looked like he was ready to take a totally different career. But that would have to wait.

Lifting a finger to his ear, he opened his COM.

****XXxxXX****

****THE DAVID GORDON FACILITY FOR MILITARY INTELLIGENCE
>MILITARY INTELLIGENCE DIVISION HEADQUARTERS
OAKTON
>GREATER ARK**

Keyes starred tiredly at the holographic display, remembering the times when he worked in front of a physical monitor. Still, it was nice to have a mechanical keyboard instead of a hard light one. The simulated tactile feedback just wasn't the same.

Opening his email, he trudged through the combat report folder. The slight nuances in the body language displayed by the Citadel Council were slightly concerning. It was as if they knew something, or knew a

little too much. Of course, the massive leak would prompt all Intelligence Organisations in the galaxy to download whatever they could, but to Essingdon, the Council looked like they knew more than they were letting on.

Already, he had ordered a number of his assets to perform counter-intelligence operations. He wanted to make sure that every loose end was cut off and camouflaged. Risking people to assassinate key personnel was risky and unreliable. It wouldn't set a good precedence for MID, and there would be too much backlash as a response.

He and Anna kept half their attention to the unfolding news bulletin. The containment teams on site were the UNSC Homeguards, a military branch that specialised in defending Coalition space and policing work in the yellow zones. Federal Agents were also on the ground with their tactical teams, sweeping the surrounding areas.

The local government had requested the aid of the Cryptology Security Agency in shutting down virtual reality servers in the fear that the synthesis Flood spores could infect hundreds across the Ark. The attack was well planned and confirmed everybody's worst fears. Rogue ONI cells were still at large, fulfilling what orders had been given to them.

But more reports began to swamp Keyes's inbox. All of them were regarding multiple bio attacks across the Greater Ark. Some of his most trusted analysts had cross-referenced names Vasili had coughed up during the interrogation. One in three matched with the site of attacks.

He knew there was something wrong when the former ODST broke to earlier. Although, shock troops weren't exactly trained to resist intensive drug interrogation. They were conventional infantry, and conventional infantry never carried much in the way of tactical information.

"Everything okay?" Anna asked.

She sat in one of the armchairs, reading over a few reports on her tablet.

"I think I'm starting to become like her," Keyes muttered.

"Who?"

"Parangosky," he sighed.

Greenfield frowned. "What do you mean?"

Keyes scooted in a bit closer to his desk and rested his elbows on the glass surface. With both hands clasped. He rested his forehead on a knuckle.

"The decisions she makes," he gestured, pointing at his monitor. "The same I've had to do."

"At least you're not having people here kill one another," she consoled.

There was a slight pause.

"I have a team on Thessia right now. They're hunting for Salarian STGs. Feels wrong."

"Morally, or something is wrong about the setup?" Anna asked, setting down her tablet onto the coffee table.

"Both," Essingdon answered. "Why would there be salarians on Thessia? It's too hot for them."

"I thinkâ€|"

The central display winked green as a soft tune chimed.

"_Commander John Richards requests to speak to you,"_ a female voice added.

Richards? Anna mouthed.

"Secondary identity."

"_They got him!_"_ the Chief's voice crackled.

"Who?"

"_Adrian. We got jumped."_

"Shit," Keyes hissed. "Where are you now?"

"_New Hammond."_

"Got it, extraction on the way."

The link terminated, Keyes leaned onto his desk and buried his face into his palms before running his hands over his scalp.

"Anna, get all every single Two we can, back here."

There was a gentleman's agreement between Essingdon and Adrian when it came to matters about Section Zero. Chen never talked much about it, but it was hinted. If rumours went as far as they did, then Keyes knew that if Adrian were broken, Parangosky and her team would be able to gain root access into surveillance networks.

Something bigger was at play he could feel it.

****XXxxXX****

****UNKNOWN LOCATION****

The room was sparsely decorated, with only three chairs and a reflective mirror standing out from the grey walls and standard ceiling lights.

Adrian was tied into a seat on the side opposite to the doors. His captors had left his upper body bare, and removed his bionic arm. Already, they had begun the breakdown phase. A cocktail of drugs had flooded his veins, leaving him hazy and his nerves extremely

sensitive. His chest was heavy too, as if his lungs weren't processing enough air.

They were blasting it all over the speakers. Some kind of dated genre called hip-hop rap. He remembered learning about it in music class. The two genres were once about liberal empowerment and pressure for social changes to improve equality, but somewhere along the line, the genre went against everything it stood for.

He could feel the high-pitched voice and synthesised tones grating on his ear drums. Something about the rapper calling someone a "stupid hoe," whatever the hell that meant. Adrian could feel his brain cells dying as the seconds passed by. How anyone could enjoy this brand of music was beyond him.

Focusing his thoughts on a simple tune, he began to block out the disconcerting noise. Gently, he eased his eyelids shut, blocking the strobes of flashing lights.

Soon the music ceased and the strobes winked off. The lights turned on, but remained dimmed. The doors opened with a hiss, and in walked a woman he half-expected to see.

"Serin Celik," Adrian drawled with a contempt smile. "How far you have come. Last year, people called you Admiral Serin Osman."

His chest rumbled with a low mocking laugh as his blue eyes focused on the Spartan-II washout. Osman paced around the concrete slab room, hands clasped behind her back. She was wearing a dark grey conservative business suit with light body armour – similar to what ONI wore.

"Your beginnings are very humbling," Chen sneered, his eyes never leaving hers.

Stopping at the reflective mirrors, she took in a deep breath and turned to face him fully.

"Your mother, Pinar Celik – did you know who she was?" he chuckled. "Or what's happened to her?"

He made an intentional pause.

"Of course you do."

Osman didn't say anything. She just stood her ground and kept her cold gaze on Adrian.

"She was a whore, an addict," he spat. "She left you to fend for herself."

Chen knew he wasn't going to get a rise out of her, but at least he'd leave a lasting impression – a bluff that he knew something she didn't.

"Normally, I'd say, 'what would your mother think?' Normally... but that's a bit of an issue, since she's dead."

Serin rolled her jaw lightly, her temples tensed for the briefest of moments.

"Then one day, a nice man from ONI comes along and offers you a burger. You went with him, just like that. If it weren't for Halseyâ€¦ you would have died on the streets in the cities of Cascade. Maybe, your teacher, Alkmini Leandro would've adopted youâ€¦ but you knew that. So maybe you hated Halsey because she stole your future of being a normal person away. Or maybe you hate her because you became a washout."

The former Head of ONI took a step closer and held herself at full height. Her arm shot out and grasped Chen by the throat, her finger nails digging into his skin.

"That's a lot of irrelevant information you have there," she hissed.

Adrian chuckled. "When you ordered the hit on Halseyâ€¦ we were planning to snuff you. Imagine how all the Twos felt about that, you ordering the hit."

Osman's right eye twitched ever so slightly.

"Brothers and sisters you grew up with, and then you betrayed them. Then you go running to hypocritical bitch," Chen cleared his throat and turned his eyes towards the one-way mirror. "Strange how you shifted all the blame to Halsey. You of all people. Sounds like a personal vendetta to me. You were uncomfortable with using children as supersoldiers, but then you get Ackerson â€" Halsey's rival â€" and have him create a program of expendable soldiers. Like using waves of angry children for the meat grinder is more justifiable, than using a smaller number to be in espionage. I would've done the same thing in your position, but with less misplaced self-righteousness and hypocrisyâ€¦ and I wouldn't have run ONI into the ground."

Serin's grip tightened. Her other arm drew back into a coil and struck. Adrian's head snapped back violently, his neck ripping away from her grip. Clearing his vision, he looked back at Osman.

"Thought you would've figured that out, but Parangosky is quite the sweet talker."

Another punch and an echoing crunch resounded. Chen's temples throbbed from the impact of reinforced gloves.

"You want to play this game? I can play this game," Osman hissed. "Adrian Chen, Earthborn. Son to Jessie Manh and Yun Chenâ€¦"

"Protip," the Operative interjected. "Family name goes before given name in the Chinese language."

Serin ignored him.

"You have an elder half-brother, Junjie Chen, who was killed when Corbulo Academy was attacked. Cathy Chen, your eldest sister was killed when New Mombasa was glassedâ€¦"

"You're bad at this game," Adrian stated flatly. "When you list

someone's personal detailsâ€¦ you want something that hits home."

"You may have cut ties," Serin said slowly, releasing her grip and trailing his collarbone. "But we still know those who are important to you."

The grey doors opened, he could hear the sound of padded soles and bare feet slap across the concrete floor.

"Adrian what are you doing?" a familiar voice pleaded.

"Delilah?" Chen muttered.

Two women were hauled into the room, their arms locked in a vice-grip with their captors. His heart droppedâ€¦ he knew what was coming. Adrian wasn't going to talk from torture alone; they were going to attack his conscious. That was how interrogators break operatives and agents.

Delilah's eyes darted around the room wildly before locking onto his. He could see the fear and confusing written in her soft and elegant features.

"What's going on?" she begged.

A sinister smile spread across Osman's lips.

"Looks like we've found our ace in the _hole_," she said her voice deep.

The other woman was dressed in a UNSC Naval service uniform. Her brown eyes locked with his cobalt blue, and she gave him a soft nod. He returned the simple gesture, thanking her for the trust she placed in him. Their friendship had been strained over the past few months. He hadn't received a call from his family so he assumed they weren't aware of Etrius or Bryce's deaths.

"What do you want?" Chen asked his voice dropping to a guttural growl.

Serin circled around the chair. "Your access algorithm."

"Weren't you the one that gave me that?"

"The one that Taylor and Hood gave you."

He shook his head. "I can't give you that."

So that was what they were after. She knew he was an Agent for Internal Affairs. His access algorithm would give them unprecedented access to all the surveillance networks within Coalition held space. Chen's eyes flickered back to where the one-way mirror was, only to find more rows of data consoles.

"She's not here, if you're wondering."

There was a slight pause as the former Admiral exhaled.

"Give us your access algorithm, and she can go."

"The algorithm won't get you in alone," Adrian argued.

"We know thatâ€¦"

The walls hissed and slowly rolled down into the floors, revealing an expansive hall lined rows of data pylons. Balconies ran the length of the entire room, both to serve as security and maintenance walkways. In the centre of the chamber was a central desk, surrounded by segmented tabletops.

"You will grant us access into this system."

"I can't do that," Adrian breathed.

How'd the hell did they get in here? He wondered. And if they could get into that room, wouldn't there be a chance of them having the means to gain access? What did they need him for? Then again, his access algorithm allowed him to access everything that MID and UEG had.

Serin sighed, pacing around the hold.

"Welcome to hell, Adrian," Osman said.

He looked back at the two women.

"I'm so sorry."

The screams lasted for a long time.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD A UNSC GREYHAWK DROPSHIP
>THESSIA**

Seventh Element, they seemed to be one of the livelier groups Anders had met during her career. The slight nuances in their behaviour and their general talkative nature made them easier to befriend. Then again, that is the kind of talent intelligence organisations look for.

Encased inside full armour, the team of SenOps Operatives looked like any other Spartan-IV fire team. Lori was not too sure why Keyes would send these men with her, from what she had learned these tactical teams operated well behind enemy lines to cause disruption.

"So why do you have rank, Anders?" Grizzly asked, his speech accent-less.

"Seniority," Lori shrugged.

Spartan-IVs were never given ranks. Natural leaders stepped up to the plate and were quickly identified. However, no rank was given. It harkened back to the days of Greek Spartans, every man in the hoplite ranks were equals.

"_Approaching drop zone,"_ the pilot said over the intercom. "_Good luck boys and girls."_

The Greyhawk came to a halt, its exhaust kicking up dirt. As the ramps descended, Anders readied her weapon and walked down the ramp. Quickly moving off the landing area, she stopped by the fortifications and took in the prefab firebase. It had been built on a plateau, surrounded by asari towers which commanded an expansive view.

"Gummi, see if you can get us a Hog," Grizzly gestured. "Honey, find some heavy weapons we might need."

"You got it boss."

Looking around Firebase Bravo, Anders could see thousands of non-combatants make their way to the shuttles. Most were asari, and some were delegates and businessmen from other nations. She could see the fear in their eyes and the tension in their expressions. UNSC Drones and soldiers paced back and forth across the lines of refugees, performing medical scans and treating minor injuries.

"Anders!" a voice called.

She couldn't tell if it was Shepard or Palmer. Turning to face the source, she saw the two women jog towards her. Lori had never talked to the Spectre one on one before, but the rumours about her were the stuff of legend.

"Ma'am, good to see you," Anders greeted.

"Palmer," Grizzly nodded with a two-finger salute.

"And you are?"

"Grizzly, Echo-Seven. What's the situation?"

"Bad," Palmer answered. "Flood's pouring out of slip space. We still have a lot more civvies to evacuate. We also have reports of a rogue ONI cell working planet side. Countersigns have been changed."

"So where do you need us?" Grizzly asked.

"CP will give you something to do."

"Got it, see you 'round, Anders."

Watching the Seventh Element leave, a frown worked its way into Lori's feature.

"Something wrong, Anders?" Sarah asked.

The Commander was wearing her regular armour once more, as opposed to the more agile one ONI issued her. She also seemed to be without a helmet.

"Why did they bother with a countersign change?" Lori asked. "If the cell has access into the systems, why bother?"

"Techs might've been able to lock them out," Shepard suggested

"I don't know. It doesn't sound right," Anders sighed.

"Hold that thought," Shepard interrupted, lifting a finger to her COMs.

Lori watched Jane's face contort into a brief moment of confusion to sheer and utter horror.

"Shepard here... shit, where are you?" the Spectre asked, her voice filled with worry. "Okay, we'll be there soon."

****XXxxXX****

****THESSIA****

The fight against the Flood was not swinging in the Allies favour. Dozens of orange streaks in the sky belonged to Coalition space borne assets. Though the Coalition Forces have fashioned themselves to be meat grinders of warfare, the Flood was going to cram more meat until the grinder stopped working.

In terms of attrition rates, these losses could be easily shrugged off by the parasite, but for the UNSC, manpower was not so easily replaceable these days. The Warthog bounded across the war torn roads of the metropolitan, the heavy tires crushing bodies beneath it.

"_Just one question,"_ Blaze chimed over the COMs. "_How the hell are we going to find the salarrians?"_

"Intel coordinates and scanners," Riley answered nonchalantly.

"_I know that, but these are salarrians. Pre-emptive espionage masters of the galaxy."_

"_And we're the artisans of espionage and pre-emptive strikes,"_ Viper added.

"_Yeahâ€¦| real comfort."_

"Tighten up formation guys; we don't want anyone jumping us."

They had been searching for the STG team for about a day now, and so far, there were no signs of them. Coalition Forces had managed to create safe zones across the planet for all asari to be evacuated. But the Flood was just pouring out of slip space, and on occasion, there would be a small ambush waiting for the team despite the fact that orbital defences were being deployed.

Thorne had to wonder where the parasite managed to accumulate the much biomass in seemingly overnight. There seemed to be too much for a galaxy that had a significantly lower biomass count.

"_Attention all battle group elements, countersigns have been updated. ONISAD team has been sighted, lethal force is authorised."_

The radio message had been broadcasted on public channels, so Riley had expected the countersigns to appear on his HUD. But the memo never came.

"Oh shit," Thorne hissed.

Riley flicked on his mike.

"Guys, pull over. We gotta get out."

"_Copy._"

The engines of both 'Hogs came to a halt. Quickly the men jumped out andâ€|

"INCOMING!" Sanders roared.

Gabe felt an invisible hand throw him to the ground and push him along the rocky surface. He coughed and turned his head just in time to see Sanders's limp form slide down a metal wall with bloodstains in his wake.

"Riley!" Thorne cried.

Sandman managed to move his arms weakly.

"Okay, I got you," Thorne said, kneeling by the Operative's side.

He retrieved a can of biofoam from his pouch. Inserting the nozzle, he applied pressure on the lever. Biofoam flowed from the canister and into the torn opening in Sanders's flesh. Sandman's armour was nearly fried; there was no way it was going to save him. Grabbing Riley's shoulder harness, Thorne pulled the injured Operative into the entrance of a shopping mall.

A trio of missiles detonated near the entrance, kicking up more dirt and shattering the glass doors.

"We got to get to the fire escape," Gabriel said, shielding Sanders from the blast.

"Where are the twins?" Riley slurred.

"Flat lined," the grim reply came. "Turn your cloak on."

Sandman complied, his form almost fading from sight, but it was better than nothing. With his head lulling back and his eyes rolling, Riley's world began to darken.

"Hey, hey! Stay with me," Gabe urged.

Sanders fell limp, his arm dragging along the polished floors.

Thorne swore inwardly as he clicked his microphone.

"Fhajad! Are you there?" he broadcasted.

No reply. Someone was jamming him. There was another alternative however, something that SenOps had unique access to: superluminal communication. He attempted to contact Fhajad again.

Still no answer. The man had to be out on lunch break or something,

maybe presenting his findings to the High Command. Throne decided to contact someone else.

"Palmer, come in!" he called, whilst dragging Riley to the fire escape passages.

No reply. He didn't even get static, just the sound of the line being immediately terminated. There was still another alternative.

"_This is the Normandy, how may I direct your call?"_ the voice of Joker flowed through Thorne's headset.

"I need you to patch me through to Cortana and Shepard, it's urgent."

"_One secondâ€¦ and there you go."_

There was a slight pause and cut in audio as the transmission was redirected via the _Normandy_'s communication relay.

"_Shepard here."_

"_Got you loud and clear,"_ Cortana chimed.

"Thorne here. We have just been hit. Blue on blue," Gabe explained. "Twins are dead."

"_Shit, where are you?"_

"We're in a mall, the one on Desiria."

"_Okay, we'll be there soon."_

"_I'll contact Command immediately, and prep a dropship for extraction."_

The line was cut, and Thorne waited. He crouched behind a column of stacked crates and scanned the plaza. Ever since the exposure, everyone had been on high alert. Thorne never thought that he would be burned, but seeing two of his colleagues being killedâ€¦ well, it made him realise that he was just another anonymous face, and he might end up as a nameless star on the memorial back at headquarters.

Looking at Riley, he pulled up and checked the man's biometrics. The senior operative's vitals were dipping dangerously close to critical. The nanites were working overtime to stop the internal bleeding.

"Just hold on," he whispered.

Reaching into one of his pouches, Throne pulled out a sonar scrambler and tossed it into one of the box gardens. UNSC active camouflage technology relied heavily on ablative plates and bending the electromagnetic spectrum, this made them theoretically invisible to all known methods of detection â€" except for sonar.

This was something he never thought he would ever have to do. But staring into the precipice, he knew he had to do it, and it left a bad taste in his mouth. Shouldering his rifle, he rested the grip pod

onto the surface of the crate, and balanced the weapon so that the sights would remain trained on the open area before him.

Crunch.

Someone was here. The footfall was light, but heavy enough for the sounds to echo throughout the mall. Straining his ears, he could hear something else, a soft hum that seemed to stand out against everything else.

He recognised that sound.

Cover!

He tapped the console on his arm, activating the gauntlet shields. A split second later, a blue beam slammed against the translucent surface. A guttural roar escaped Gabriel's lungs as the force of the weapon hurled him down the hall. Skidding along the concrete, he came to an abrupt stop as his back crashed into a support pillar.

"Riley!" he screamed, seeing the mangled body

They knew where he was, leaning out of cover, he fired a few shots at the source of the attack. The assailants retaliated with Achilles missiles. The small sized projectiles drilled into the walls and detonated, showering the hall in sparks and debris.

Thorne's shield alarms blared in his ear, forcing him to retreat and find a safer position to defend himself.

A thunderous explosion shook through the building, causing the lights to flicker and the floor to rumble. Someone was calling in airstrikes while the people who were trying to kill him were still in the same building.

He could hear the struts creak and groan as the dusts seeped down from the cracks.

"Are you insane?" he growled to no one in particular.

Thorne fired back into the entrance of the fire escape and quickly advanced to Riley's body. Slinging the limp form onto his back, he sprinted down the corridors and immediately turned right into an alcove. Looking at the simple hinge door, he slammed straight through it. The timber barricade was somewhat of a surprise to him, but he couldn't dwell on the thought to long.

Reaching into his pack, Gabe unveiled a spare stealth module and attached it to Riley's armour. Though not as effective as the systems built into the Incursion suit, the module was more than capable of baffling sensors.

He was in a store that specialised in formal wear. Ducking down, he moved along the rows of clothing, keeping his profile to a minimal. Activating his goggles, he switched the setting to make it only receive signals. In that way, he'd have some form of detecting sensors.

Looking around the mall, he could see a few wirings from back up relays and a few power generators, but no signal from his hunters. Like him, they had set their goggles to receive signals only as opposed to sending out one like radar.

From the corner of his sight, he could see a shadow skim along roofline. He couldn't tell if it was a Firehawk or a Sparrow. Firehawks specialised in providing close and deep air support, its sensors arrays was designed specifically to hunt any kind of ground target. Sparrows were designed primarily to land in hot zones to provide light support and extract or insert soldiers.

Either way, Thorne didn't like it. He was on his own, outnumbered, outgunned and outmatched. He moved away from the entrance foyer and into a massive atrium, its skylight shattered and the floors littered with glass.

Placing Riley behind the safety of a pillar, Thorne manually checked for vitals. He felt a slight pulse in the veins, faint and nearly unnoticeable. Unpacking the remained of his field dressing pack, Gabe jammed the biofoam needle and emptied the contents of the bottle.

With a short respite before moving, Gabriel checked his tactical map. It stopped providing real-time data the moment he was jammed, but it was better than having nothing. Breathing softly, he listened to the winds and the sound of war that was carried with it. He guessed there would be at least two Firehawks operating in the sector, a mechanised company and a platoon of ODSs.

There weren't any Flood within ten miles of the mall. Thorne waited, and scanned the perimeter with his goggles. Dozens of signatures began to register on his HUD.

Most were tagged as ODSs, but he didn't have their names, only ranks.

"_Thorne, are you there?"_ a female voice flowed through his earpiece.

"Cortana?"

"_What's your situation?"_

"Bad," Gabe answered grimly. "Sandman is barely alive. We need a medevac now!"

"_I'm trying to get Command to rescind that kill order."_

"And?"

"_And they have."_

"I don't know what they're telling you," he growled. "But I'm looking at a platoon of ODSs."

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ABOARD SSV DREADNOUGHT **_EVEREST**_**

>IN HIGH ORBIT OF EARTH

Originally, Hackett had thought himself to be close to retirement age. The daily hum of military life was something that suited him, but he felt a calling to be with his family and live off the money he had earned throughout his career. Looking at his own bank account, he could easily afford a sustainable life of luxury.

Then life has a way of disrupting long-term plans. With no Alliance Defence Committee or Alliance Parliament, Admiral Steven Hackett was now the most powerful man in Alliance history. UNSC resources went a long way to push the Alliance in becoming a terrifyingly effective strike force.

Gazing out the window, Hackett could see the war torn landscapes of Earth below. The sapphire emerald planet was wracked with black streaks crisscrossing her surface. Hundreds of thousands of drones and sentinels were methodically rebuilding the lands, but there was still plenty of cleaning to do.

He walked to the central display and observed the current progress of re-terraforming Earth. UNSC AIs were still in the process of cataloguing DNA strands found in the genetic material vats across the globe.

"Sir," a crewman called. "Slipspace sensor buoys just lit upâ€¦"

â€¦

****ABOARD UNSC SUPERDREADNOUGHT **_**SUPREMACY**_**

Alarms blared throughout the entire bridge, the ominous drone rolling throughout the large hall.

"Grayson, status report!" Hood barked.

The AI's WWII Era British Officer Avatar appeared on the nearby pedestal.

"Multiple contacts coming out of slip space. Multiple Flood prescience detected on Earth."

"Bring the Fleet around and prepare to attack. Get all personnel off groundside for evac," Hood ordered, looking at the tactical display.

Within the confines of normal space, slipstream tears opened. Parasitic ships from all eras surged out of the portal like a wave. Many of them, Hood could identify, others were too ancient or too alien to be recognised. Some looked like machinations of nightmares from the sea. Covered in a thick carapace and tentacles, these ships defied science.

The Admiral moved to the central display and began plotting courses for each strike group. His fingers hovered over the holographic three-dimensional map as he ordered his fleet to form a multi-layered staggered wedge.

"Get SkyGuardian to provide cover fire," Terrence ordered.

"Copy sir," a crewman complied.

Within Earth's high orbit, the geosynchronous platforms rotated to face the new threat. Stabs of blue leapt from their turrets, striking deep into the ranks of the Flood.

Hood then opened up COMs.

"Admiral Pendanski, move your Fleet to flanking position."

"_Acknowledged, Orion Fleet is on the move."_

Orders were given and relayed to the Fleets defending Earth. Scutum-Crux moved to the western hemisphere of the planet, while Carina Fleet retreated from the moon's orbit and headed towards Earth. Engines flared to life as the behemoth ships of the Coalition moved to engage the Flood.

Sangheili ships glided into combat, plasma collecting along their lateral turrets. _Silent Peace_ launched a salvo at an unidentified parasitic ship. The trio of plasma torpedoes streaked through the vast emptiness of space and rippled across the shields.

Another salvo, leapt from the UNSC Keyship _Provident Guard_, her ion cannon gutting the parasitic vessel from stem to stern. Atmosphere vented from the stricken ship, billowing molten metal into the endless night.

"Peewo, bring all guns to life, I need targeting solutions," Hood ordered.

"Copy sir," the Principle Weapons Officer Lieutenant Jennings complied.

Her finger tips bounced across the console as she furiously calculated an array of possible targets, alongside with Grayson.

"Targeting solutions for multiple targets acquired, sir."

"Fire!"

"Fire!" Lieutenant Commander Danielle Toulouse relayed.

A soft hum swept across the entire ship as all the guns and missile batteries fired. Minor subroutines assisted with human piloting, guided hundreds of plasma torpedos to their targets, vaporising scores of boarding crafts out of existence. The larger gun batteries swung into action, hurling salvos of savage power towards enemy frigates.

Supremacy shifted as the crew manoeuvred her main gun to bear. Capacitors spooled up as the main hatch open, unleashing a constant stream of devastating power. Hundreds of ships caught within the burning blue column were reduced to nothingness, while the larger vessels were thrown asunder.

"Gun is hot, redirecting coolant," Engineer Jameson reported.

Vats of subzero liquids surged through the pipes and into the capacitors. Jameson kept his eyes dead centre on the screen, careful not to over cool the capacitors.

"Do what you can to keep those guns running as long as possible," Hood said.

"Yes sir."

Looking at the camera views, Terrence could see millions of fireballs ripple throughout the entire battlefield. Sangheili ships plotted firing trajectories that arced around the entire formation and hit the parasite from the flanks. Flood ships were gutted from stem to stern as ion and hard light fire burned through the hull.

Interceptors had been deployed. Taking up defensive orbital patterns to engage any boarding craft, squadrons and controllers constantly relayed messages to avoid friendly fire. Terrence wondered what it would be like, to be in a silent cacophony of war, sitting in a small craft and soaring through the vacuums of space while immense energy were flung at one another.

Flood ships began to fire back. Purplish-blue plasma collected at the tips of the fallen Covenant ships, and streaked towards the Coalition ships. The UNSC Cruiser New Ellis adjusted her course, facing the torpedos head on. Her crew redirected all power to the forward shields, and a nuclear warhead left her hold.

A fireball winked into existence, robbing the torpedos of their magnetic field and dissipating the plasma. But the later salvo readjusted its course. The projectiles slammed into the invisible barrier, sending a rippled of wispy plasma over the ship.

New Ellis retaliated. Torpedo hatches opened, and cannons swung to bear. In one swift blow, the Flood ship was torn asunder with savage energy.

From the display monitor, Terrence could see the Covenant Cruiser twist and turn violently as it shook itself apart. With the superstructure unable to sustain the stresses, the ship broke in two, and spilled sparks into the infinite vacuum.

"Array is online, sir," Jameson called.

"Spool her up."

"Copy sir, slaving controls to peewo."

Since the UNSC had gained preliminary access to the Halo installations, they had spent centuries perfecting and reverse-engineer the devastating yet clean weapons. Thus allowing the Array to be mounted on anything from a cruiser or to a superdreadnought.

"Controls acknowledged, waiting on your go, sir," Jennings confirmed.

"Grayson relay orders to all ships to use the Array. And plot us a course for optimal firing," Hood ordered. "Willis, get us there."

"Aye sir," the two answered.

Terrence watched on the tactical map as Supremacy's signature moved towards the northern pole. Dozens of frigates and destroyers were locked in their own furious battles between ships of equal size. Though the Coalition ships were far superior, they were up against a force that rendered quality mute.

"Destination reached," Grayson reported. "Confirmation for Array Firing required."

Hood and Toulouse placed their hands on a plinth simultaneously, and the on the count of three, both rotated their palms along the surface before stroking a visual pattern.

"Access granted."

"Jennings, open fire," Hood ordered, his XO relayed it without hesitation.

"Copy sir, Array firing."

Another rumble rolled along the decks as the capacitors unleashed their stored energy. A cool ghostly blue left the ship's main gun, like a calming breath and swept across the entire Flood fleet. Countless vessels, covered in sickly vines were stripped of their flesh, but there were some that resisted.

"Moderate effectiveness," Grayson reported. "Some enemy ships are equipped with mass effect fields."

The unexplained reactions between mass effect and Forerunner Positronic technology seemed to negate one another. Hood wouldn't have put it beyond the Flood to use whatever resources were available to protect themselves from radiation that was to target the nervous system.

Countless hundreds of military and luxury vessels continued their course without course corrections. There was no one left aboard those ships. But Council race ships that had been assimilated were still functional.

"Sir, more ships dropping out of slipspace," another crewman reported.

A Forerunner Frigate, having just exited the portal, made an immediate beeline for the UNSC Destroyer Yastreb. With engines flaring, and a stream of light in its wake, the frigate slammed head on into Yastreb. Hulls were breached, and bulkheads dented as debris billowed into space. Both ships traded blows at point blank range, ripping each other apart. Another Flood ship dropped out of slipspace behind Yastreb, it was a Reaper. With tentacles outstretched, the Sovereign-class ship clasped onto the hull. The ancient ship began to lick at the armour plates with a fiery red tongue, slowly burning its way through.

Sangheili Carrier Enduring Will tried to come to the rescue of the stricken human ship, but before she could unleash a devastating torpedo, Yastreb self-destructed. A blaze of orange engulfed the surrounding ships, ripping superstructures apart, and turning them into molten flecks.

Seeing it, was like seeing a fireworks display, a spectacular sphere of ember sparks blossoming like a flower.

"Additional contacts to our rear, and on the other side of the Earth. Admiral Langford reports her Fleet is being overwhelmed."

Carina Fleet was being encircled. Magnetic interference deployed by the Flood was preventing the ships from making a slipspace jump to safety. Hood could only watch helplessly as the UNSC ships were swarmed. In space, the battles were fought on all planes.

"Damage reports, sir," Grayson gestured towards another console.

A list of Coalition ships that had suffered damage began to roll onto the display. Most suffered minor breaches, but there were a growing number of vessels being boarded.

The UNSC Carrier Sapience slowly moved into an offensive position. Lining up her upper plasma turrets and guns, her crew selected a variety of targets to prey upon. Firing solutions were calculated. Streaks of ghostly bluish purple stabbed through the night. Plasma bolts arced in a beautiful trajectory, boiling the hull away of the infected ships.

A Flood ship dropped out of slipspace in front of her prow, Sapience's engine immediately flared to live, slamming her superior mass to crush the smaller ship.

Many of the smaller vessels were obliterated in a single stroke, but the bigger ships could take more of the beating. Even if the ship was compromised, the Flood didn't care. So long as it could board and infect another, then it didn't matter.

"Sir," a crewman cried. "UNSC Provident Guard reports heavy Flood presence."

Looking at the camera, he saw the ship's engine cut out in mid manoeuvre. The thrusters sputtered and cooled as she began to roll listlessly. Her hull seemed unscathed, but something was terribly wrong.

"Provident Guard, initiating code
Siera-Delta-Nine-Echo."

Self-destruction order... dozens of frigates and destroyers immediately pulled away from the stricken Keyship, some even performing emergency jumps back into slipspace. An agonising moment later, a fire ball bloomed from within and split the ship in two. Chunks of debris spun and streaked into the space beyond, some striking shields and armour plates of opposing ships. It was like standing in the midst of a meteor shower.

Supremacy was too large to avoid the wave of burning slag, but she did have enough guns to destroy the larger targets, letting the

shields bear the brunt of the rest.

Another ship self-destructed. The tactical display flashed critical as scores of allied ships were overwhelmed.

"We're losing, sir," Toulouse whispered.

Terrence nodded in agreement. The Flood had dropped out slipspace at a predetermined site. Then once all Coalition Forces were committed to defending a breach, the rest of the enemy fleet would return to normal space all around Earth.

Bait and swarm was what they called it back in the academy.

Thousands upon thousands of ships traded fire back and forth. The Flood made extensive use of fire ships, luxury vessels sent into the fray to embrace a torpedo of immense energy. They were going to keep on shoving meat into the grinder until it would stop working.

A combined salvo from assimilated Forerunner Destroyers leapt from its prow, striking the UNSC Carrier Endurance. The ship's shield overloaded. The intense beam of light burned straight through the mid-section, spewing molten metal and venting gas into the vast emptiness.

With her superstructure severed, the ship slowly broke in two. Sensors tracked the trajectory of the escape pods. But some didn't get far before they were claimed by larger Flood vessels.

Terrence sent a silent prayer for the poor souls aboard. Lifepods were never armed with anything more than an armoury of light firearms.

"Prep nukes," Hood ordered.

"Copy sir."

Jennings opened an interface on her console, going through the regular procedure of ID check and ID challenges before the nuclear weapons could be used.

"How's the evacuation coming along?"

"Principles are off planet and are moving to rendezvous sites," Toulouse answered, looking at the report on her display. "Civilian contractors are still on the ground. Reports of multiple Flood spore contacts around developed cities."

Hood swore inwardly, Keyes had warned him about this. He could haphazard a guess that Parangosky had a hand in it. He should have terminated her when he had the chance.

"Guns ready" Admiral, multiple explosions detected on multiple decks in sections alpha and delta," Grayson reported frantically.

The main display for the ship flashed red, internal security footage was shown on the display. Crewmen and Marines were being overwhelmed by countless Flood forms. Internal security checkpoints were quickly

overran as soldiers were assimilated.

"Sir, Flood pr-pr-pre-sence-ence-ence de-detected within the-the-the sys-sys-system-em-em main-mainframe. Engineering-ing-ing comp-comp-comp-compromised-ised-ised-ised," Grayson stuttered. "Mul-m-m-m-mul-tip-tip-multiple inc-inc-incur-cur-cursions re-re-re-port-port-reported on â€"other-other-ther-ther ships-ips-ips."

His avatar shimmered and wavered in a dichotic palette of colours.

Hood looked at Toulouse and gave her a short nod. In a coherent motion, both of them reached for the console, and entered override protocols. Throughout the entire ship, massive slabs of metal slid into place, and hissing shut. Terrence's aged and weary features began to reappear on his ageless face, the countless years of torment and tiredness waltzed in his eyes like a morbid dance.

Flood spores poured out of the vents, choking people where they stood. The fallen washed over the armoured Marines. With tentacles flailing, the Combat Forms tore soldiers apart, turning them to bloodied smears on the wall.

Engine r-r-room off-off-off-li-li-line, s-s-s-sir-ir-ir."

This was the end, and he knew it. Taking in a deep breath, he activated the communications network.

"This is Admiral Hood speaking," Terrence broadcasted across on all channels. "Flood has breached our borders, the ship is lost. Evacuation Order Sierra-Delta-Nine-Charlie. Make your way to an evacuation point and get the hell off this ship!"

Walking to the centre of the Command Bridge, the Admiral began reeling off orders.

"Marines, hand out the weapons. Nothing gets through the bridge doors. Seal off ventilation."

"Yes sir," the men chorused.

The lights flickered as the power conduits were severed. Milliseconds later, backups kicked in and kept only the most vital sections functioning.

"Admiral, I have sev-sev-severed my systems," Grayson said calmly. "Primary engine core has been breached, main engines offline. Secondary power sources are failing."

"Damn it. Can we get a broadcast out?"

"Yes sir," the AI nodded. "I have notified all ships of our situation and relayed evacuation orders."

Terrence looked at the ship layout display. As per protocol, all UNSC ships were actively shielded by the effects of the Array. Keyships and Omnipotence-class had additional composite alloy shielding. He couldn't order another cruiser to fire the Array on his ship, simply because it would be ineffective and the power drain would leave the

cruiser vulnerable.

Power to the cameras was severed, but a few crucial wireless cameras with separate power sources remained functional. He could see the Marines fight a losing battle against the horde, their guns being slowly silenced one by one. Combat Forms ripped through the defenders' armoured suits with flailing tentacles or discarded weapons.

"Grayson, can you contact any Spartan teams on board?"

"Yes sir, Spartan-Three Onyx Team. Patching you through."

"_Onyx here,"_ a female voice answered.

"Onyx team, this is Admiral Hood," Terrence breathed, a lump forming in his throat. "What's your location?"

"_Bomb Bay-Four."_

"Okay, I need you to get to Bay-Five and arm the NOVA."

There was a slight pause.

"_Copy sir."_

From the bridge, Hood could hear the soft clicks and faded howls of the assimilated bashing against the bulkheads. On the other hand, maybe it was the audio from the cameras. He saw soldiers fighting in vain for their lives, combat drones overwhelmed and overridden, and the ships from his fleet either self-destructing or escaping battle.

Warfare was something that was either lightning fast, or a stalemate wrestle. With more and more ships retreating, the Flood soon surged towards Earth, intent on consuming all the biomass on the planet.

Sitting down in his chair, he watched as Onyx Team fought through the endless waves of Combat Forms and hijacked drones, with utmost precision.

Eventually, the team was whittled down to one â€" the Leader. Battered and bruised, her armour covered in sickly grime, she reached the NOVA bombs. Tossing a grenade down the hall, the resulting detonation shook the camera and slightly jarred the feed.

"_This is Onyx, requesting arming code."_

"Delta-Five-Charlie-Nine-Alpha-Foxtrot-Echo Everest."

The Spartan-III tapped the interface in sequence of dashes, arming the device.

"_Device armed... detonatingâ€|"_"_

Hood looked at everyone on the bridge and stood close to the COMs.

"It's been an honour," he said softly.

He wondered if all the Fleets had made the jump into slipspace. He hoped that the Alliance ships had left before the slaughter began. His thoughts reflected back to his late wife, and his son and daughter who would survive him.

No regretsâ€|

In the span of a heartbeat, Earth received another sun. The light swept through Sol as the unrelenting power tore through the insurmountable numbers of ships, and Earth. The skies cracked and roared as the shockwave tore away the atmosphere and boiled the oceans. The grounds shook and mountains crumbled as continents were shattered.

Humanity's home for millennia passed was reduced to nothing but a shattered globe, with angry red veins streaking across the onyx black lands.

****XXxxXX****

"_Separation of power is the only way to keep a large empire stable. Internal rivalry is what keeps us alive and keeps us evolving; internal conflict is what destroys us. Though organisations may clash, they will ultimately work to serve the empire and keep one another in line. Having too much power under the one thrown will lead to difficulties, and having too many heads will lead to a maelstrom of conflicting interests. The key to keeping the UEG and UNSC afloat is to share power over the right number of peopleâ€| or more importantly, have the correct power ratio."
>_**_Doctor Timothy Burke, UEG Policymaker**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** To the anonymous reviewer who said "I hate how you misinterpret the actions of ONI and cast them in a bad light, etc."******

****Karen Traviss already did that with her work. I'm simply trying to portray ONI how Nylund did; divided but sane, with humanity's best interests at heart.****

â€|

**Mortal Dictata****, so I don't really have any inkling to go read it. And from what I've read of the reviewsâ€| totally not going to read it. Funny though, how there's a mention of a UNSC Law forbidding Flash Cloning in this book. I seem to recall there being something in ****_**Glasslands**_**** about Flash Cloning tech had been perfected when the S-II program was about to be implemented. (Tries to give the finger to Nylund's work, but it looked like someone had some sense to knock everything back into placeâ€| somewhat).
>Thank you to those who've read the story and posted a summary and trivia up online for me to analyse and save me dissection time.

****And to those who say I'm being unfair to Travissâ€| I read her work on Star Wars, the Republic Commando series and other novelsâ€| I gave her way too many chances. Though I will say her contribution to**

****_**Halo Evolutions**_**** is greatly appreciated. I enjoyed that story (though sad that Gravemind stopped speaking in rhyme early on, but I'll let that slide)â€| probably why I was willing to give ****_**Glasslands**_**** a shot â€" until I read the reviewsâ€| and the first chapter.**

â€|

****Well, I hope you enjoyed that chapter. Please leave a review and let me know what you think.****

63. Perception

****XXxxXX****

"_When you get paid a million credits a yearâ€| your perspective on life begins to change."

>****_**Greystone**_****

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD THE SSV **_**NORMANDY SR-2**_****

>GEOSYNCHRONOUS ORBIT ABOVE NEW ZEALAND, AUCKLAND
EARTH,
SOL**

The immediate peace after the storm was always so surreal. No matter how many times she had been through it, the calmness just feltâ€| numbing. Shepard's weary blue eyes gazed forlornly at the med bay, once populated by Doctor Chakwas and Doctor Solus. Karin, the matron of the _Normandy_ was long gone. Her death had hit Joker the hardest, he never showed it, but Jane knew how much Jeff was affected by it.

EDI also kept track of the Flight Lieutenant's vitals, and constantly searched for ways to ease his grief. EDIâ€| at first she was a little more than a disembodied voice and a floating chess piece, now she was _alive_ and a valued friend.

To see her and Legion grow and develop, it was something Shepard could only describe as _beautiful_. Not something most would say, since Council galaxy saw AIs as dangerous entities, whereas the Coalition practically grew up alongside them.

There was no doubt in Shepard's mind that she had led a life which saw the best and worst of two worlds that humanity lived in. Upon first meeting the UNSC, she saw them as being a group of people who were realists and tried to make the best of their situation. She saw them as advanced and cultured. But all that free will would always lead to inevitable conflict.

The insurrection, and the absolute worst; the Cerberus Conspiracy. Like Adrian had pointed out, too many people died for the wrong reasons. He was gone too; a life like his could only have one ending.

She wondered what Ash would've thought had she still been around. Maybe the second human Spectre would've reconsidered her pro-human stance after seeing the other side of humanity.

Turning her attention back to the kitchen, she watched the amber flames lick the base of the frying pan. John was cooking dinner, with everyone else having gone to visit family or arrange things back home, he and Shepard had decided on staying on the Normandy for a while and justâ€¦ watch the worlds go by.

They had done more than their fair share, and now it was just time to take a step back and let others take control of the reigns.

"Dinner is ready," he said, serving the slab of asari marinated Wagyu beef onto a bed of rice.

According to the Institute of History Archives, Wagyu beef was a Japanese delicacy. Not as well-known and timeless dishes such as udong or sushi. Wagyu beef was extremely decadent and rich in flavour. Adding asari spices with it was going to give it a sweet, savoury and slightly tangy aroma.

The way how John and Essingdon had hyped the dish, made Shepard's mouth water.

"Thanks," Jane beamed as he set down the plate in front of her.

As he sat down opposite to her, she poured them both a glass of port and dug in. Unlike most people Jane knew, she preferred to have her steak rare, Wagyu beef was no exception to this rule. Cooking it well-done would destroy its flavour and rob it of its texture. Clearly John had done his research into how to prepare the meal â€" that or he had it enough times to deduce how to make it.

Cutting into the slab, she noticed veins of fat interlaced the red meat. She wasn't a fan of fat by itself, especially the fuller ones that seemed to bulge of steak like globs of gravy. Poking it with the point of her knife, she noticed that the texture was not as tough nor as light, it was closer to that of the surrounding flesh.

Lifting a piece into her mouth, a small smile formed across her lips as the delicious flavour rolled around her taste buds. It was rich, it was savoury, and it was absolutely divine.

"Maybe we should have SakÃ© with this," she joked.

"I'm not a fan," John said.

Jane laughed, her rich voice filling the halls.

"The only thing you drink is milkâ€¦ and port."

"At least I don't have a chocolate dependency," John countered with a rare smirk.

She just smiled and shook her head; he had a fair point though â€" but she couldn't let him win that easily.

"I drink pineapple and mango juice too."

"And you've also had mango and Dutch chocolate ice creamâ€¦ togetherâ€¦ numerously," John punctuated.

"Vanilla ice cream."

"With chocolate sprinkles."

"Mocha?" Jane squeaked a bit too hopeful.

"Still chocolate."

"Fineâ€¦ I have a chocolate problem."

Finishing off their meal I light conversation, John offered to clean up, and allow Shepard some down time.

She walked out of the mess bay and into the port observation room. Easing into one of the arm chairs, she gazed out across the massive expanse of the scarred planet.

There was something about watching the thousands of machines rebuild Earth. The UNSC Fleets hauled chunks of the planet back to the main body, whilst mining drones brought resources in from the asteroid belt.

To Jane, it was something truly spectacular, seeing a world being rebuilt. Terraforming was one thing, but recreating a planet on a colossal scale was something else entirely. It seemingly reminded her of what Udina had said to her after Earth had been attacked by the Reapers.

"_I can move mountains, but the task at hand is moving planets."_

Earth still had a long way to go before it would be cleared for resettling, but one day, one day she hoped to have a home on the sapphire-emerald sphere.

Taking in a deep breath, she walked over to the sofa and settled into the black leather. She heard the doors part open, and the soft footfalls follow closely behind.

"Hey," she called out softly.

"Jane," a soft and deep voice returned.

She felt his presence just behind her, and his hand on her shoulder. Reaching up, she laced her fingers with his and held on tightly.

"You should get some rest."

"Mmmm," Jane protested weakly. "Five more minutes."

A weight shifted onto her left shoulder, she felt his chest rise and fall as his throat rumbled.

"Janeâ€¦"

"Oh, alright, alright," she said with a mischievous glint.

With his strong arms wrapped around her, they headed up to the Captain's cabin. Leaning into his chest, she could smell his unique scent.

His lips brushed her forehead as his nose buried into her hair, breathing in the aroma of aloe and citrus. It was clean, tough yet welcoming and uniquely _her_.

She couldn't remember when they had gotten on or off the elevator, but she didn't care. The doors to her room opened, and she was quivering with excitement.

Kicking off their shoes, she snaked her arms around his neck and pulled him towards the bed. With John lying on the bedding, she slipped off her shirt, and revealed her toned midriff of creamy skin. Tucking in a stray strand of brunette hair behind her ears, she gave him a sultry smile.

Long wispy eldritch tendrils wrapped her body as she reached for buttons of his shirt, and slowly undid them one by one. Pulling it off, she frowned slightly as she realised a tee was standing between her and the prize. She reached for the hem of the black cotton and pulled it over his head.

John could see it in her eyes, pure lust as she drank in the sight of his godlike definition. Absolute perfection of strength, speed and _flexibility_.

She leaned in, pressing her bosom his chest, until they giggled with glee and traced his jawline with her fingers. Shivers ran down her spine as she felt the stubble ebb away at her biotic fields.

Whispering something huskily to him as her lips were closing in, the two of the closed their eyes, waiting for that moment of pure, raw bliss and ecstasy.

Suddenlyâ€|

Orcs.

Orcs broke through the window, flooding Shepard's quarters with green and glass. The only sound that roared louder than the screams of the escaping air was Jane's war cry and the crackling flame of her flaming war hammer.

"IT'S A TRAP!" She roared!

Leaping off her bed, Jane slammed the heel of her foot into an orc's groin. The creature howled as his family jewels was crushed to oblivion by the biotic. Spinning on her axis, the war hammer came crashing through another's ribs and bursting the torso like a squashed grape.

"RWAAAR!" they chorused.

Jane pivoted left, and whipped her bare shin into a green skinned creature's nose, caving in his frontal cranium and spilling gore onto the bed sheets. From behind her, John dashed to the coffee table, and crashed tackled an orc into the glass plane.

Lacerated by the shards, the brute flailed helplessly as its lips met the Spartan's stone hard fistsâ€| repeatedly. Grabbing a broken off

limb from the table, he launched himself at another orc, and brought the metal through an orc's temple.

"John, catch!" Shepard called.

Her biotic flared as she sent him two jagged blades, before returning to the task at hand. So many orcs were rushing through the windows, but the equal number was reduced to nothing but red and green smears.

Swinging her flaming axe, she launched an orc into her fish tank. Its armoured back shattered the glass and water flooded the cabin, washing away the gore. Hammer raised, she brought it down on an orc's skull, cleaving his body into messy halves.

"Go back to the abyss!" she hissed.

And as the day dragged on, they sung as they slewâ€¦ in the name of the Emperor.

****XXxxXX****

"_Here, take this Ring to the Forerunners in Narnia, let it not fall in the hands of Chaos for the Sith will take over the Enterprise and destroy Equestria, allowing North American Vampires to overrun Azeroth, leaving the Avengers without allies and so the Reapers will win. You must traverse the waters to the city of lovely bones filled with instruments built by mortals._

Your quest is of utmost importance, Katniss. For the Ceph is everywhere, their Cylons will stop at nothing to prevent you from succeeding. But fear not, the Green Lantern Corp will help you traverse the Warp, and deliver you to Batman.

_May the Father of understanding guide you."
>_**-Supreme Cupwimp of the Pan-Conglomerate of Stick Wielders and Chief Warlock of the Wizengambit Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore â€" Piggimples Principle**_

****XXxxXX****

****April Fools ladies and gentsâ€¦ April Fools.****

****All credit of this magnificent punchline goes to Arec.****

****.****

****.****

****.****

****Boy, you guys must really hate me right now. Butâ€¦ much story. So twist. Many rage. Such plot. Wowâ€¦ swegg.****

****All joking aside, I'll take this chapter down and replaced it with _Deception,_ coming soon. We're nearing the end of _Lost Legacy__._****

64. Deception

****XXxxxXX****

"_Warâ€| it's in our very nature. We may profess peace, but our affinity for conflict will always be there; ready to override any sense of rationality or hindsight."
>_**-Professor T. Willis**_

****XXxxxXX****

****GREATER ARK AIRSPACE****

The hold was quiet and dark, the men who sat within the bay remained still and silent. No words were spoken, no sound was made. This had been the first time in centuries since they had all been together. They all knew what they were about to do. Their orders had been given, and they were going to carry out no matter the cost. No one dared argued with the morality or ethics of it all. They had all crossed that line a long time ago.

They were everything the world hated of them, but they would never be hypocrites. For when their final days came, they would die and know that they had followed their creed with unshaken loyalty.

Nicholas had devoted his life to his duty; he had done everything it took to see that humanity would live to see another day. He had crossed so many lines people would even dare to think about. He had done all thatâ€| one more wouldn't hurt.

He felt the shuttle's deceleration as the gravity dampeners were turned down. It was the crew's way of telling the passengers that they were coming up on arrival.

As the shuttle descended through the atmosphere, Nick checked his watch. It was Friday night; he knew that his estranged family would be out having dinner at this hour, followed by a movie.

"_Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. We have reached the Greater Ark. Set temperature is twenty-two degrees Celsius, or seventy-one-point-six degrees Fahrenheit. The local time is seven pm. We hope you've had a pleasant flight, and wish to see you again soon. Cabin crew prepare for disembarking."_

Nick sent his team a short nod. Pulling himself up from his seat, he gently lifted his bag off the overhanging locker and walked towards the bay doors. A stewardess pulled the crÃ"me surface open, and gave him a customary smile.

"Thank you," he said kindly.

"Have a pleasant evening, sir."

Walking through the walkway between the holds, Nick made his way to the exits and headed along the aerobridge into the terminal. The glass planes revealed the unique landscape of the Greater Ark. Beautiful buildings that merged with the lands, and the gently flashing beacon of a monument.

"Up for this?" Jake asked.

"Yeahâ€¦ I am," Nick answered.

****XXxxXX****

****CLASSIFIED LOCATION****

They hadn't laid a finger on him since the torture began. But his nose and eyes were already bleeding. The unexplained side-effects of the additional augmentations, spurred on by extreme emotional or psychological stress.

Every time he heard them scream, his temples throbbed and his heart ached. He casted his tired blue eyes on them, looking at their bruised and bloodied forms under the halogen light.

"You will talk, sooner or later," Osman said, pacing around the perimeter. "How much you let them suffer, is up to you."

Adrian remained silent, his eyes fixated on the black clad figures of the next generations of wetworkers. He used to be like them, young, emotionless, and more than willing to serve. He couldn't appeal to their better nature â€" they didn't have any, not yet.

Another scream, a ripple of torn clothes, his temples throbbed harder.

He tried tearing his eyes away, but he couldn't. Streams of blood flowed down his face, his voice hoarse. He tried to plead her to stop, but her demands were the same.

He couldn't give in.

"Give me the algorithm!" Osman hissed.

Her hand drifted toward her lower back. The glint of cold metal flashed passed his eyes as her finger rested on the trigger guard.

"One more time," Serin repeated. "Give me the algorithm."

"Three Day, Day plus thirteen to the power of ten, plus open brackets Month, Month to the power of four, exponential Year, Year, Year, Year, close brackets, multiplied by its first derivative."

Seirn nodded to one of her men. The Operative worked out the algorithm and entered the result into the console.

"We're in."

Adrian turned his eyes back to Julia.

He looked back up at Serin, and the barrel of her pistol. Closing his eyes, he thought of home and the long life he lead. Somehow, he knew it would end this way, and he had accepted that. He'd lived long, seen far more than the average man, and he was content knowing that he had done some good.

It's going to be okayâ€¦

****XXxxXX****

****THE DAVE GORDON FACILITY FOR MILITARY INTELLIGENCE
>MILITARY INTELLIGENCE DIVISION HEADQUARTERS
OAKTON
>GREATER ARK**

The Command room exploded into a motion of action as officers rushed to their consoles. Fingers danced along keyboards as personnel furiously typed in commands.

"We've got an algorithm ping," an Officer said. "Site Gamma Beta."

Keyes swore inwardly.

"First Element is responding with security forces."

"Get Commander-117 to go with them, and send a team to get his armour," Essingdon ordered.

"Yes sir."

Site Gamma Beta was also known as Big Brother's Bunker. Every dirty secret the UEG had and every unsanctioned mission against other nations of the Coalition. If Parangosky or Osman gained access into the system, it would harm political relations, and might very well start a war.

"Shit," he murmured.

"What is it?" Anna asked.

Essingdon pursed his lips and looked at one of the desk jockeys.

"Get me the financial reports of Charybdis Defence, Marisah Armouries, AramaTech, GenSoft Industries, and Aegis Defence Contracts."

"Sir, they're on screen now."

Keyes looked at the projections and drew in a deep breath. There had been an increase in employments rates and company expenditure, however it did not coincide with the steady levels of company revenue or expansion in UNSC supply demands.

Then it hit him.

"What're you thinking?" Greenfield asked.

"War," he murmured. "She's starting a war."

Anna looked at him quizzically with an arched eyebrow and arms folded.

Essingdon looked back at the map and displayed battle statistics across the board. There were inconsistencies with the Reapers' numbers, reports from fleets also indicated that assimilated forces would've retreated and regrouped. Too many unknowns.

"Green, get someone to get visual confirmation of Reaper strengths," the General ordered.

"Where?" she asked, confused.

"Look at the darkspace near Hegemony territories. If our force projections are accurate, we should be looking at a lot of Reapers there, dead or alive. Flood or otherwise. Oldest confirmed Reaper is one billion years old. If every cycle last fifty-thousand years and they only make one Reaper per cycle, we're looking at minimum, twenty thousand Reapers. We've only destroyed a few hundred, where are the rest?"

Anna paced back and forth, mulling over scenarios.

"Terminus Systems," she suggested. "We've got no eyes in there. Synthesis could've made them docile."

"Okay," Keyes nodded. "While you're at it, get every single one of our assets back here. Immediately. They are to drop everything and return."

"Alright— now, the war part."

Keyes rested his fingers under his chin, and looked towards the carpeted floor.

"Look at those increases in expenditure— then look at the income. Notice anything?"

Anna ran her eyes across the displays.

"Those increases don't coincide."

"Exactly. Now why?" Keyes tested.

"Because they're expanding and creating surplus for _future_ revenue."

"And that revenue will come from war."

The revelations hit everyone in the room like a freighter. The inexplicable Flood contacts around the galaxy which did not match infection propagation, coupled with the assassination of the first Council— a weakened and destabilised Council would leave the entire galaxy ripe for colonisation and expansion. The situation would then snowball from there.

"But would the Council wage war on us?"

Keyes looked at the map, mentally marking down the location of every military asset.

"No— It's a power play."

Greenfield walked up to the display and placed a finger on her chin.

"The Hegemony has been wiped out, and the Terminus Systems has gone dark— with most of the Migrant Fleet gone, territorial expansion

for the Coalition will be enormous," Anna said.

The control room quietened, officers stopped their work and looked at the main display.

"The ambushes, Flood attacks, assassinations, what were all those about, then?" Anna asked.

"They were distractions," Keyes answered. "She knewâ€¦ she knew from the very beginning that I'd prioritise the Flood before anything else. This wasn't about some moral codeâ€¦ this was about expansion."

"Cerberus is still active thenâ€¦"

Essingdon nodded.

For the first time in Keyes's career had he felt soâ€¦ _worthless_. He'd been outplayed since the very beginning. The exposures, the political strife, they weren't objectives, they were just distractions.

****XXxxXX****

****DESIRA, THERMOLY
>THESSIA**

Rounds crackled and hissed as they chipped away the rocks and reduced the metal to slag. Thorne leaned from cover and returned fire, scoring a hit on one of the ODSTs. He was rapidly losing control of this battle, and fast. The Helljumpers had heavy weapons ranging from LMGs to Lasers. They were going to tear this mall down with him inside it if they had to.

"_Thorne, _Normandy_ here,"_ Cortana radioed. "_We're coming in. Shepard isâ€¦_"_

A wave of heat washed over him, tossing him end over end. Thorne skidded across the tiled floor, and slammed into the metal walls, denting the violet surface. Dots swarmed his vision as his world slowed to a crawl. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, his vision narrowed as he concentrated on the Helljumper with the thumper.

A trio of bursts echoed from his weapon, catching the man dead centre. But before the killing shot slammed home, the ODST retreated back into cover.

"Riley!" Thorne called. "Riley, can you hear me?"

The Spartan rushed to the Operative's side, checking his vitals.

"Fuck!" he swore.

Sanders's vitals had flatlined. His armour had fused to his skin, and the smoke curling from his helmet said that he wasn't going to make it.

"Cortana, I'm pinned. Sandman is down."

"_Dammitâ€| okay, I'm setting up a navpoint, get there asap, and I'll get some firesupport for you."_

The link was terminated. Enemy fire boiled away at the covers, a few rounds scoring hits on Thorne's shields.

"Sorry, man," he said quietly to Sanders.

Pulling a grenade from his pouch, he placed it onto Riley's body, and pulled the pin. Without missing a beat, his pushed off the ground and surged towards an exit. Cobalt lances lashed through the air, sizzling and crackling as they struck the surrounding environments.

Alarms droned in Thorne's helmet as his shields were dangerously close to failing. Swinging around the access corridor, the Spartan rushed down the narrow path and let his shields recharge. A dull thump registered in his ears a moment later. But he couldn't think about it, not yet.

Two black armoured figures appeared at the end of the hall. Thorne had barely any time to react. Pushing off the walls, he launched himself into an alcove. The dimly lit access way was alit with savage energy. If it hadn't been for the Ox-rebreathers, he'd be choking on ozone.

He had to find a way to get around the ODSs before they were reinforced.

Reaching into his pouch, he pulled out a flashbang. Tossing the cylindrical device down the hall, he stood fast behind his cover, and waited.

Fump!

Leaving the alcove, Thorne roared as he charged the two Helljumper. With his weapon switched to fully automatic, the Spartan squeezed the trigger and watched the two soldiers convulsed as columns of sapphire drilled their way through the armour and cooked the flesh beneath.

Smoke curling up from the crumpled forms was quickly dissipated as Gabriel leapt over them. He turned around another corner, and ran across the remnants of a garden atrium.

"_Thorne, we're in position,"_ Cortana informed. _"Danger close."_

"Copy," he panted.

Seconds later, the ground shook and concrete crackled. The support struts screeched as debris fell from the ceiling. The violent thumps roared through the air, whipping up dust and obscuring vision.

Gabe switched to his optics, and watched the outlined world via his HUD.

"_That should slow them down,"_ Cortana said. _"Move fast and move hard. I'm detecting two destroyers on attack vectors to the _Normandy. _Shepard should be waiting for you with a 'Hog._"

"Copy, moving there now."

Thorne breathed an uneasy sigh as he saw the entrance foyer. Suspecting that there could be a trap by the doors, he opted for the windows. Soaring through the air, he sailed through the glass pane, shattering the surface and raining shards down onto the garden boxes below. Gabe flipped forward and landed on both feet, crushing the flowers beneath him.

Making a quick scan of the area, he found that he was clear, and continued on.

â€|

Mixed feelings, something Jane was beginning to deal with on a regular basis these days. The UNSC was a great boon, but they also had their drawbacks. Rogue elements in ONI for one, were the worst thing on her shit list. Collectors and Geth were up front with their intentions; anyone could guess what a merc's agenda was, and though the Reapers spoke in circles, they were straight forward enough. But ONI? Good luck trying to guess what they were up to.

"Thorne should be on the left turn, fifty meters," Liara said, looking at her map.

"Got it," Palmer complied.

The Spartan eased off the acceleration pedal as she guided the Warthog around the corner, and came to a skidding halt behind a skycar.

"Get in!" Jane roared.

Thorne quickly rushed up to the extended wheelbase hog, wrenched the back door open and scrambled inside.

"Go! Go! Go!" He urged.

Palmer didn't need to be told twice. Jane heard the bash of metal as the Spartan Commander slammed her armoured boot down on the gas. The Hog shot forward, pressing the Spectre into her seat.

"What's the plan now, Lola?" Vega asked.

"Escape and evade," Jane answered.

"_Right turn ahead,"_ Cortana chimed over the COMs. "_UNSC Forces are up ahead."_

"Oh shit! They're opening fire on us," Vega cried.

Sarah slammed the breaks and made a hard left. The tires skidded on the road before kicking up dirt and launching the 'Hog through a wall. Chunks of debris crashed onto the vehicle, bashing against the armoured hull.

"_Bastards!"_ Cortana bellowed over the COMs. "_Make it quick people! Cortez is coming in fast. We need bug out real soon."_

"What's wrong?" Palmer asked.

"_I've been locked out of the battlenet."_

Shepard swore inwardly, bringing a hand to her mic, she keyed in the radio.

"Cortez, what's your ETA?"

"_Two minutes, Commander. Be advised, there are Sparrowhawks inbound, I've tried hailing them but they're not responding."_

"Floor it, Palmer."

The Warthog's engines whined as the Spartan slammed the pedal to the floor. On board computer systems worked frantically to compensate for the weight shift and changes in terrain.

"Through that cafÃ©!" Liara pointed.

Ploughing through the walls, as gush of air escaped Shepard's lungs as the seatbelt fought to keep her in her seat. Glass shattered all around them as the furniture was crushed beneath the wheels.

"There's Cortez!" Vega shouted.

Palmer brought the 'Hog to a halt on the dirt. Wrenching the doors open, the small team left the vehicle behind and made a mad dash for the dropship. Boots thundered up the ramp as people got themselves strapped in. Jane and Sarah were the last to board, closing the hatch behind them.

"Everybody's in, let's go, Esteban!" James bellowed.

With all the power diverted to the engines, Jane felt the weight of an elephant crushing her. Air screamed past the dropship as Steve steered the craft into the stratosphere.

"_Hang on! We're coming in!"_ Cortana announced.

Shepard looked out the viewport, nothing but a violet sky. Then, the _Normandy_ appeared out of slipspace. In the span of a few short seconds, her ship was there waiting for her. Guiding the dropship into the hangar bay, Cortez set the bird down and popped the hatch.

Jane was the first out of the dropship, followed by Palmer. The two rushed into the elevators and entered the keys for the CIC. Shepard's heart was hammering away in her chest, threatening to turn her ribs into dust. She tried to bring her bringing down, but the adrenaline pumping in her blood vessels wasn't making it easy.

Palmer was standing next to her, both hands on her knees, gasping for air.

The elevator doors parted open, revealing a wide-eyed Traynor as Shepard bolted for the cockpit.

"Hold onto something, Commander, this one is going to be nasty,"

Joker said.

Without brittle bones, the Flight Lieutenant's reaction time had improved immensely. His fingers darted across the controls, entering in commands and diverting power.

"We've got two destroyers on our six," Cortana announced, her nude avatar body appearing on the nearby pedestal.

"Prep countermeasures, EDI."

"Yes, Shepard."

Out of the rear ports, dozens of flares were shot into the thin atmosphere. A split second later, they detonated into a brilliant white flame. It was the starship's equivalent of a smokescreen in space, and acted as an excellent deterrent against fighters.

Looking on the map, Shepard looked at the radar blindspot caused by the flares. So far the destroyers hadn't broken through and reappeared. Her bluff worked.

"Slipspace jump commencing," EDI announced.

A thunderous roar rippled through the deck, throwing Shepard to the floor.

"Shit!" Joker hissed. "Starboard engines have taken damage. Starboard shields depleted. Diverting power now."

The remaining engines flared as Moreau pushed the ship into the safety of slipspace. Alarms blared across the bridge as the crews frantically worked to stabilise the ship.

"Damage report?" Shepard ordered.

"Rear-hull integrity is down to sixty," Jeff answered. "Starboard engine two is offline."

"Are we going to make it?"

Joker nodded.

"_Commander Shepard,"_ Cortana interrupted. _"High-priority order from General Keyes. He's requesting that the Normandy return to the Greater Arkâ€| says the Chief might need help."_

"Set a course," Shepard ordered.

"Aye, ma'am."

****XXxxxXX****

****THE DAVE GORDON FACILITY FOR MILITARY INTELLIGENCE
>MILITARY INTELLIGENCE DIVISION HEADQUARTERS
OAKTON
>GREATER ARK**

Keyes remained rooted at his display, a bead of sweat trickling down his temples as fire and ice ran down his spine. She had been waiting for him, she had her ambush. He knew she would've expected himâ€| he

just never anticipated the extent of her reaction. The feeds showed a pile of smouldering rubble, red lights winking as the ground teams requested CASEVAC.

"Chiefâ€¦ what's the situation."

"_Four teams lost, fifteen wounded. Echo-One is okay."_

"Copy, report back."

"_Yes sir."_

Stepping back from the console, Essingdon walked to the back of the control room and headed for the kitchenette. He could do with a drink. Rounding the corner, he arrived at the fridge and took out a bottle of water. With the lid unscrewed, he held the drink to his lips and drank it down greedily, hoping to stave off the growing headache.

Rapid footfalls filled his ears; he turned to see a pale Anna looking back at him.

"Our communications have been severed," she whispered.

The lights wavered and winked off, leaving only the glow of non-electrical lighting.

"We're in the blind."

****XXxxxXX****

"_You know what the problem of being politically correct is? The problem is you can't expression your fucking view without someone crying 'mommy'. It's obscene, it's ridiculous. You say something that someone with a 'holier than thou' complex doesn't agree with, be prepared for a bitch fest. I can't call the Sangheili, split-lips anymore without some _human_ calling me a racist. I can't enact a protocol to screen extra-terrestrials because that would also be seen as racist. What these idiots don't understand is that it's my duty to protect _them_. Not the split-lips, or the Grunts, or the birds, or the apes that come seeking asylum. Just last week a Sangheili tried to nuke Rio. But I can't enact martial law on the aliens because that would be seen as a fucking racist. Idiots. All of them. Makes me wonder why I should give up my holidays so that they can sit in their lounges and call me a bigot."

>_**~Director David Gordon**_

****XXxxxXX****

****At the behest of a few colleaguesâ€¦| **_**Perception**_** will remain in its sovereign chapter slot, and **_**Deception**_** shall take up another and continue on with the plot ark.****

â€¦|

****So I've been debating this idea for quite some time now, and a friend of mine decided to spur me on to starting it.****

****I was wondering if anyone was interested in doing fanart for this story. This can vary from a new title image, or concept ship designs,**

or character designs. If you're interested, please PM me.**

However it's a bit late in the story to do this since we've only got three chapters left, **_Betrayal, Endgame,**_** and Epilogue.**

Currently, I have another Halo/ME Xover story in the works (I know, I can hear all of you groan), name is yet to be decided, but keep an eye out.

Cheers,

Andrithir

65. Betrayal

**Betrayal**

XXxxXX

"_Sometimesâ€¦ it's easier to walk away and let someone else have a goâ€¦ give the cause a fresh start."
>_**-(Director of Intelligence RET.) Josiah Bartlett**_

XXxxXX

THE DAVID GORDON CENTRE FOR MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

Alarms were blaring over the speakers as security personnel flooded into the area. They looked nervous, scared as even as they tried to get everyone off the facility. Keyes was being herded towards a waiting mobile command unit, while Greenfield would be taken to another. Essingdon could see the fire rise from the communications hub, and smoke hanging above the power generators.

The guards moved in a defensive wedge formation, shotguns at the ready. Essingdon kept his ears pressed against the radio chatter, trying to make sense of what was happening. Outbound communication was being jammed, leaving only public channels, but those were cluttered and overwhelmed with cries for help.

Reaching the enclosed hanger, Essingdon boarded the craft, finding that his personal staffs were already on board and waiting. He strapped himself into a seat and awaited take off, but never took his eyes off the surge of chaotic reports.

"Set a course for orbit over New Hammond," Keyes ordered. "And get me a line to the Chief."

"Yes sir."

XXxxXX

SITE GAMMA

John moved into the central control room, sweeping across the aisles of servers. Looking at the centre of the room, his eyes landed on the

sight of three battered bodies.

"We've got live ones here," he whispered into his COM.

Turning on his flashlight, he shined it directly into the naval officer, Commander Manh.

"Identify!" he barked.

"Commander Julia Manh," came the weak reply.

"Doctor Delilah Orton."

Lowering his rifle and turning off the light, the Spartan made one last check of the area.

"All clear!" Cassandra said.

"Clear here!" Maria broadcasted.

The Chief turned to face the slump form belonging to Adrian. Dried blood covered his clothes, and his mechanical arm removed.

"Two alive, Arca's KIA," the Spartan said into his throat mike, solemnly.

He knelt by the fallen figure, holding Chen's shoulder to sit him straight. He can't be dead, John hoped inwardly. But in front of him was a harsh truth that not everyone made it.

"Damn itâ€¦" Fhajad murmured. "We're dropping like flies."

"Alert, system disconnected to battle net," the MJOLNIR's computer chimed.

John cycled through the COMs to contact the perimeter teams.

"Status, Webb."

"_Sir, we've lost contact with Command. Police chatter is heavy. Flood contact."_

"Where?"

"_Everywhereâ€¦ and the Presidential Palaceâ€¦ hold on, secondary systems online. Patching you through."_

John heard the slight switch in the audio, the distant chatter of operators and the sound of clicking keyboard flowed through his speakers.

"_Chief?"_ it was Essingdon.

"Here sir," the Spartan answered.

"_I need you and your team to proceed to the Capital. Expect heavy Flood presence."_

****XXxxxXX****

****Aboard C-798 Mobile Command and Control****

Keyes paced endlessly back and forth the hold of the Northlock C-798 SkyWatch transport.

"Jenson, any luck on getting through?" the General asked.

"No sir," replied a young man. "COMs are down, public channels are being flooded."

"Anything on the emergency?"

"Panicked cops."

Essingdon swore under his breath as he moved towards the central display. The tactical map would provide real time data feed, but without the network, it was just showing the last snapshot before everything went dark. SkySentry was unable to paint a picture with storm clouds ravaging through the area. It was nowhere as useful as it needed to be.

"Send a team to the weather controls," Keyes ordered. "Jenson, try and see if you can get the Chief of Staff online."

"I'm trying sir, but his last known location is in the dead zone."

"Damn," Keyes muttered. "Has anyone reached the President yet?"

"Secure is offline, sir. President's in the blind."

The horrifying realisation began to set in that he was the highest ranking military officer on the Ark.

"Sir, Greenfield wants to speak to you."

"Put her on central."

The main display shifted and morphed into a two dimensional screen.

"_Reinforcements from Lesser are on the way,"_ Anna said.

"Good, Greenfield, you'll be acting Head for the duration of this crisis while I coordinate military forces."

"Yes sir."

Exhaling, Essingdon turned off the feed and switched back over to the map. A team of AIs were currently shifting through

"Get every asset available converging on the Presidential Palace," he ordered, clenching his fist.

"Sir, call coming in from the _Normandy._"

"Patch it through."

An image of Shepard materialised onto the screen. She was still in her armour, covered in dirt and grime.

"We got burned," she said solemnly.

"Is everyone okay?"

"We lost Sandman" | "

Essingdon exhaled tiredly, rubbing his jaw as he stretched his mandible in a tired gait.

"I know it's a bit soon asking a favour" | but I'm running out of options here."

Jane gave a light nod.

"Could you and your team make your way to the Presidential Palace. ID challenge is 'Richmond', response is 'Frostings'. I need you to try and get the president."

"What about the Chief?"

"He's en route with a team."

The link was terminated as Keyes returned to his seat. He lifted a finger to his temples, rubbing them to relieve the oncoming headache.

****XXxxXX****

****ENROUTE TO PRESIDENTIAL PALACE****

John constantly scanned his surroundings as the ragtag convoy of Bullhounds roared their way through the capital. Power had been cut out, and there were countless of pile ups on the road. A flight of Sparrows and Pelicans circled above, forming a preparing to form a secondary communications network once the jammers were taken out. But with the weather systems out of control, storms were obscuring visual and the jammers blocked any penetrating scans.

Pillars of smoke and flame rose from within the city as the Flood began to damage the local infrastructure. Sentinels were converging from all directions to ensure the parasite would not break out beyond the city limits. Superluminal communications allowed him to see thousands of drones moving through the subterranean levels and locking off chokepoints. Formations of contingency units lined up along the city limits, scanning escaped civilians and triaging or quarantining them.

"Turn right at the next intersection," the Chief ordered.

Maria quickly turned the wheel, smashing the Bullhound through an abandon police cruiser. Anyone left this far into the city would most likely be assimilated. Flood spores were thick in the air as hundreds of forms lurched onto the roads, intent on stopping the convoy.

"Free to engage," Fhajad said.

Gun operators quickly brought the heavy turrets to bear. Lances of blue leapt from the barrels in a thunderous roar, burning through flesh and bone.

"So what's the plan?" Cassandra asked.

John turned to look at her, and then knocked his fist onto the roof of the cabin.

"We'll smash through the front. One-Echo will go through the east wing. Two-Echo will go through the west, and we'll take centre."

"Palace, three clicks," Fhajad said. "Take the next right, and then right again at Treasury."

The moment the Bullhounds pulled around the corner of the Treasury building, they immediately came under heavy fire. Shields sparked and flared as they absorbed the brunt of the assault while the active defences did its best to eliminate as many missiles as possible. But the people who took the Presidential Palace came prepared.

It was like standing in the middle of a firestorm as energy billowed in the air around them.

Maria swung the heavy vehicle around, smashing through a shield node which looked eerily familiar. John scanned around for more familiar equipment. His eyes settled upon a node which projected an orange barrier of interlocking hexagons, obscured by the heavy rain.

"Those look like anti-bio shields," Fhajad commented grimly.

"They're frying our sensors," Cassandra murmured.

John looked down at the displays, the video feeds crackling with static.

"Floor it," he ordered.

The Bullhound's electric engines spurred and hissed as the vehicle charged forward. An explosive charge rocked the armoured truck, engulfing it in a ball of soot and ash.

"Systems are still green, keep going!" Cassandra urged.

"_Spartans,"_ it was Keyes._ "I'm sending reinforcements your way. Shepard and her team are in bound."_

"Copy sir, we'll clear an area."

An updated tag appeared on the battlenet. The _Normandy_ was showing signs of critical damage. Holding steady above in orbit, the stealth frigate was flanked by a flotilla of frigates, ready to deploy their compliments of ODSTs.

"Cut through the memorial park," Fhajad indicated. "That'll give us a run for the gates."

"Main driveway's going to be rigged," Cassandra added.

"Then clear a path," John said.

Cassie quickly swung the turret to bear and squeezed the fire controls. A slew of torrential lances leapt from the barrel and struck the road, melting the synthetic material. Bullhounds behind them followed suit and began to sweep the field, detonating a number of heavy ordinances.

Spouts of fire lurched from the grass, flinging clumps of dirt into the air.

"Target the gate; get those barriers out of the way."

Grenades launcher engaged, the explosive rounds pummelled through the trimmed hedges and the fortified checkpoint. Metal twisted and warped while wood shattered as the Bullhounds roared over the crumpled gate and onto the main drive way.

Another rocket detonated in midair, the active defences moving to engage. John leaned closer to the windshields, spotting a number of shooters.

"The hell is that things?" Maria pointed.

Flicking his eyes over to the base of the stairs, John saw an all too familiar site. His heart filled with dread as he recognised the floating orange sphere " an offensive Omni-tool drone.

****XXxxXX****

****PRESIDENTIAL PALACE****

Special Agent Gabby Walker had served five years in the Presidential Bodyguard detail. In all her years on the job, her colleagues had told her to expect the worse, but this, this was something else. A nightmare of endless horrors.

Gunfire echoed down the halls as men and women frantically attempted to regain balance and order. But Walker knew deep down that anyone daring enough to go after the President, would most likely be able to succeed.

She kept a firm grip on President Taylor's coat as she ushered the woman up a flight of stairs. One moment, everything was running fine, and then all hell had broken loose.

Secret Service Agents were dropping left right and centre from accurate sniper fire, seconds before assaults teams surged through the building. They were methodical and efficient, using high-end military grade equipment to overwhelm the defensive measurements such as reinforced doors and sentry turrets.

Walker knew that she was laughable outnumbered, outmatched and outgunned. Her standard issue pistol was all she had against an opposition force using Spartan Lasers and LMGs.

"Stay down Madam President," she whispered, pushing the woman behind

a counter.

Gabby panned her eyes across the kitchenette area, reserved for the Presidential family and close friends, an informal recreational room that doubled as a panic room. Only, hunkering down here would be a bad idea. It was on the second floor, east wing with a commanding view of the gardens, and no means of escape.

"Fletcher, cover the exits," the Chief of Security commanded. "Jace, status? Jace?"

No reply.

"Dammit," Custler murmured, he switched to another channel. "Thalos? Thalos do you read? Webb, copy? Do you have eyes on the Elites."

Still no reply.

"Sir, we can try making a break for the basement," Walker suggested.

Custler looked at her incredulously.

"Are you insane?" he whispered. "Flood is attacking the city. We'll swing around to the armoury and hold out there."

Gabby swore inwardly. They were running out of breathing room, and fast. Anyone ballsy enough to assault the compound would definitely be aware of the layout.

"We stay there, we're dead," said Teller.

"Same thing if we go out there," Custler counted. "Wait here, and pray that someone comes."

"Shit," Teller murmured.

Fire erupted again. Smoke and flame leaping out the Agents' barrel. Gabby glanced down the corridor, trying to catch a glimpse off of the shattered mirror. She could see the eerie red hue and the crimson laser pointers that zeroed in on the Presidential Bodyguards.

"We gotta go!" Walker cried, lifting the President to her feet.

"Fall back!" Custler barked. "Fallâ€¦"

The Chief of Security doubled over, his chest heaving in pain as blood oozed onto the white carpet floor. Body armour and energy shields were doing little to stop the murderous onslaught. Teller quickly reloaded his sidearm and fired three shots down into the hall before rushing over to Custler. Grabbing him by the collar, Teller dragged him to safety.

"Flashbang!"

Gabby managed to push the President into a narrow corridor before the grenade detonated. A thunderous clap rippled through the room as a blinding white light washed everything within reach. Bells rang in

Walker's ear as she desperately tried to blink away the light shadows in her eyes.

She felt something pierce her side, overloading her shields and punching straight through her body armour. A cry of pain left her lips as a fiery sensation rippled through her stomach. The floor rushed up to greet her, her face slamming onto the rug as another Agent crashed onto of her. Then, blackness.

****XXxxXX****

****ABOARD NORTHLOCK SKYWATCH****

Keyes paced around the hold anxiously, watching as the blue signatures slowly made their way towards the Presidential Palace. Whoever came up with the attack had struck at the perfect time, end of financial year where the Capital would be at its packed peak, and when the President would have a meeting with other Coalition leaders.

"Sir? ISA SWAT in Oakton has a live feed for you. Director Wilson said you might want to see it."

"Put it up on screen."

The main display shifted, revealing a dark lit control room. Keyes could see SWAT officers covering a meteorologist as she desperately tried to return the weather patterns back to normal. But seeing the size of the storm, it could take hours. And in those hours where air support would be unavailable, the counter assault elements would lose an edge.

"General Keyes?" a male voice asked. "This is Agent Trent; we have something here for you sir."

Leaving the room, Trent entered a hallway, patrolled by another squad, before entering another room. Down on the ground were covered bodies, all neatly laid out. Beside them were weapons he hadn't seen before, and _thermal clips_.

"Oh my god," he murmured to himself.

Trent knelt by one of the bodies and lifted the bag, revealing a salarian.

"Any survivors?" Keyes asked.

"No sir," the Agent replied.

"Alright, thanks."

Essingdon breathed out shakily as he reached for the arm of his chair.

"The hell did they get here?" he wondered.

Tapping commands into his console, he called Greenfield.

"Anna, get everyone you can to set up chokepoints and denial zones. I don't want anyone slipping through."

"Got it."

The hold of the SkyWatch was eerily quiet, with only the indistinct COMs chatter breaking through the silence. It was like reverting back to WWII communications. Select units had access to superluminal nodes, and those units coordinated their combat efforts by using messenger runners.

Until the jammers were removed, the UNSC combat drones were stuck at the city limits. If they were to move in prematurely, their connection would be severed this reducing them to useless husks. The Sentinels had no problem however, but they weren't enough.

Essingdon felt uneasiness in his stomach, there was too much going on that suggested something more sinister was at play. But he could also sense certain desperation to its actions. As if this attack was some kind of one final attempt to set something else in motion.

****XXxxXX****

****A/N: Almost there, one more chapter to go!****

66. Endgame

****A/N: Well folks, the last chapterâ€¦ well, we still have the epilogue left.****

Endgame****

"_Do you think people really change? Or do you think that in the end, once we've become who we areâ€¦ we're set in stone that wayâ€¦ and nothing really changes."

>-J. Finch**_**

****XXxxXX****

****ONI MOBILE COMMAND****

"Sir?" a young analyst called.

"What is Carter?" Keyes answered.

"Take a look at this," Will said, pointing towards the last snapshot of the tactical display. "Came in from Westwell and Northfolk."

Essingdon leaned forward and looked down the screen. It was data signals gathered from Echelon and SkySentry. A series of signals from burner phones started to form an image of hundreds of units converging onto weather control systems as well as triangulated sites of Flood attacks.

"But that's not the scary part. We have burner signals coming from _inside_ the facilities before the attack."

"We should've been able to pick something up," said Keyes.

"Echelon is good, but not that good. This is a timeline of burner signals from the past year No way the system would've picked this up."

"Did we have anything from HQ?"

Carter shook his head.

"This doesn't explain the salarians though."

An uneasy pause settled between them.

"Shit," Keyes murmured. "It's a set up."

Stepping back from Carter's desk, Essingdon walked back onto the main floor.

"What's our ETA?" Keyes asked.

"Two minutes until orbit of the Palace, sir."

Easing himself into his chair, Essingdon pressed a knuckle into his bottom lip as he eyed the displays anxiously. They were still in the blind. He opened up his private connection to the Spartans, and whispered into the microphone.

"Chief?"

He heard two mike clicks, and the sound of heavy gunfire mixed with a torrential rainstorm.

"_We're bogged down. They have anti bio shields," _the Spartan replied.

"Keep pushing, I'll keep you posted, out."

The link was then cut, leaving Keyes even more confused. Whoever had done this had blindsided them. But what was the motive? The attack on Site Gamma was a nerve centre into Echelon and SkySentry, allowing unprecedented surveillance access. And it also allowed the attack a direct line into the UEG Intelligence Community.

But the person had to know that Intelligence had a shelf life, today's news could easily become outdated in mere seconds. They couldn't be after asset deployments because that was kept on a separate system entirely. Unless it was a diversionary tactic.

They would've used Adrian's access code to gain preliminary access. But he gave them the duress algorithm. Something Keyes decided to implement the moment he took office. Unless the attack on Site Gamma was just a diversionary tactic, a way to temporarily blind the surveillance networks and scatter response.

The Presidential Palace, they were going after the President. But the moment the Palace was compromised with the President still on site then all her access algorithms and codes would be immediately deactivated.

"Oh shit, we've been played," he muttered to himself.

Attacking the Presidential Palace was not a diversion, it was the goal. They didn't want the access codes; they wanted to kill the President.

"But why?" Keyes wondered.

He pulled up the treasury reports again, the one that he and Greenfield talked over. Large sums were being transferred to infrastructure and mining.

Mining.

He remembered, Cerberus didn't use UN Credits, but mineral resources. That was practically the best way to stonewall money trails.

"Sir?" a controller broke him out of his thought. "FIA and Asset Lima have confirmed one of the Jammers are down."

"How many left?"

"Unknown sir."

XXxxXX

PRESIDENTIAL PALACE

John quickly pushed up the main flight of stairs with his Spartan in tow. Two Secret Service Agents lay dead at the doors, their blood covering the white marble walls and shattered glass. By their feet lay two turian combatants, judging by their blue armour they were Blue Sun mercs.

"Fhajad sweep left, Maria keep an eye on the mezzanine. Cassie, keep them suppressed," John ordered.

Green acknowledgement lights winked on his HUD as the Spartans took breaching positions. Pulling the pin out of a flashbang, the Chief tossed it through the shattered window.

Thump.

Charging through the door, the Spartans surged into the main foyer, moving around the security checkpoint. Once more they came under a hail of accurate fire from the level above.

"No traps! Keep up the pressure!" John barked.

Optics engaged, he sprinted up the stairs and fired three rounds into a retreating figure. Sparks danced from the frayed electrical system. Small fires licked hungrily at the curtains. The Palace had been hit with an EMP.

Staring down the hall, John motioned for the Spartans to move up, signalling for them to be in a staggered formation.

"They're turning tail," Maria hissed.

"Keep it up," John said.

Moving down the corridor in cohesion, the Spartans kept an

interlocking field of fire as the moved through smaller foyers. The lack of resistance was unnerving. Secret Service Agents and SWAT teams lay dead, riddled with bullet holes and slumped against the furniture amass the bodies of turian, asari, salarian and even krogan.

But something wasn't right, John could feel it in his gut. The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he motioned his team to do a quick sweep.

"Something's not right," Fhajad commented.

Keying his COMs, John contacted the other teams.

"This is Blue, anything on your end?"

"_Nothing,"_ replied Cain._ "This place is dead."_

"_Bunker is empty,"_ added Wilks, leader of Second Element.

"Alright, converge on the Office."

Green lights winked in acknowledgement.

Entering another foyer adjacent a flower garden, John saw a glint of ornate armour and a blood soaked cape.

"Found the Elites," Cassandra gestured.

"Something doesn't add up here," Maria frowned. "Look at this."

She pointed towards a huge stab wound in the side of the delegate's neck.

"You'd need superhuman strength to do that," Fhajad concluded.

"Which only a krogan has," John added.

"And they're not the most subtle," Fhajad said. "Angle suggests he was jumped."

John switched on his COM.

"Sir, you getting this?"

"_Affirmative,"_ answered Keyes. _"I'll have Shepard and her team orbit the area."_

"What about the ODSTs?"

"_They're on site forming a perimeter. Sweep through the Palace, and flush out the attackers."_

"Copy that, sir."

Clearing another hallway, the Spartans entered the private living areas. At this point, there were only dead Secret Service Agents. The damages to the walls indicated that they were up against crippling

fire power.

The Spartans entered another hallway, climbing up another flight of stairs that would lead to the final foyer and the President's Office. Optics showed nothing, but that was likely that whoever had attacked was gone, or they could circumvent the tech. Doubtful, if they were Citadel races.

"Stack up, plant charge," John ordered.

Splitting into two groups, the pairs formed up on both sides of the reinforced doors. John made another sweep with his optics, there was nothing on the other side except for a few dead bodies, and that had him concerned.

Fhajad pulled a door breacher from his pack, and placed it on the centre.

"Blow the charge."

John felt a dull thump ripple through his body as the charge went off. Time crawled into slow motion as the Spartans surged through the classical office, quickly fanning out and getting out of the killzone.

"Clear," the Spartans sounded.

"Check the panic room," the Chief gestured towards the timber bookshelf.

The same process repeated, the Spartans lined up and surged through like clockwork. Unlike the richly decorated office, the panic room was more utilitarian in design. There was a main desk which most likely acted as a barricade.

Behind it were a dead secretary and two more agents. The doorway to the left of the desk led to the main panic room.

"Holy hell," Maria trailed, looking at the warped armoured plates. "That's Aegis-Seven. You don't just cut through that."

John checked the alloy through the infra-red.

"Still warm," he said. "Sloppy work. Must've been adhoc."

"Someone was trying to get in, in a hurry," Fhajad added.

Entering the small room, the Spartans found it empty, save for the small guard detail that lay dead around them.

"Or they were trying to get out," Cassandra said, staring at the gaping hole off to the side of the room.

"Keyes, are you getting this?" John asked.

"_Crystalâ€| dammit. I'll get back to you. Look for the President. Don't rule her out if we don't have a body."_

Motioning for the group to fan out and search, John moved to one of the bedrooms. He placed his hand on the metal door and pushed it

open. The servos screeched and groanedâ€¦ something it shouldn't do if the power was still on, and every safe room had its own independent power source.

Crathoom!

John's head snapped back violently as a white flash swarmed his vision. He quickly fell back and rolled to his left as another shot echoed, punching a huge hole into the floor. The alarm in his visor began to blare as his shields were dangerously low.

Blinking away the dots, he quickly brought up his rifle and squeezed the trigger in quick succession. Lances of blue stabbed through the dark room, lighting up the dark setting and burning through the dÃ©cor.

The Spartan saw flashes of a black armoured figure.

ONI.

Another shot echoed, slamming into his shoulder blade. A staggering blow which costed him precious seconds.

"Ambush!" Fhajad roared.

There was no time to come up with a plan B, just reacted. Staying in the main area left him too exposed. Without hesitation, he charged straight into the master suite, instinctively ducking seconds before another round flew straight over his head.

His shoulder crashed into the rogue ONI Officer, slamming him against the wall. The plaster coverings flaked and cracked under the immense pressure, books fell from above.

The Operative barely had enough time to move before John's fist shot through the air where his head had been. The Spartan's armoured hand slammed into a book shelf, splintering it and denting the wall.

John quickly back stepped, and brought the butt of his rifle up to the Arcani's chin with shocking force. The man doubled back, falling against the wall. Moving in quickly, the Chief brought down the heel of his boot onto the man's stomach before he could readjust his rifle.

The Operative heaved out a guttural pained howl as an armoured boot nearly crushed his abdomen. But he wasn't beaten. He quickly reached for his pistol while the Spartan quickly hammered away his shields. Firing a few half-hearted shots back, he looped his arm under the bed frame and launched it at the Chief.

The Spartan sidestepped, swearing inwardly as precious time was lost. He needed to move in close before the rest of the unwanted reinforcements came.

Unleashing a powerful back kick, a thunderous clap echoed through the room as the metal door slammed against the frame and knocking the other Operative to the ground.

Vaulting over the bed, John slammed his fist against the ONISAD Operative's faceplate, and was rewarded with the sound of crumbling

ceramic plates.

That was probably what the Operative had reached for under the bed.

Another trio of bullets slammed against his shields, all aimed at the head to blind him. And it worked. John swore inwardly, the Spartan-IVs and the Elites were never this creative.

Beat creativity with insanity, a voice that sounded like Cortana suggested.

Quickly unlatching the bandolier that housed his grenades, John pulled the pin and charged forward. There was nowhere for the Operative to run.

Bffump!

The audio mufflers kicked in at the very moment John's vision filled with white. Pulling himself up to his feet, John quickly ran across the ash choked carpet, and swung the remnants of his rifle down. A sickeningly wet crunch filled the room as the pistol grip caved in the cranial armour plates and bone beneath.

John watched in grim satisfaction as blood oozed over the shattered optics of the Operative's as he slumped onto the floor.

Two more shots bashed against the armoured door at the hinges. The metal frame toppled over with a resounding thud. John barely had enough time to register a modified short barrel Epirus was pointed at him before he ducked once more. He threw himself beside the bed and reached for the rifle of the other operative.

Checking the Epirus, it had two rounds left, and seemed to be in working order. He just hoped it didn't explode in his face. Despite the warped sights, he didn't need it, not at this range.

Rising from cover, he felt a round whip him across the shoulder, with enough force to nearly make him lose his grip.

The alarms blared again; his HUD displayed the armour integrity. The GEN5 is impervious to most small arms, but an Epirus was designed to destroy gunships and armoured fighting vehicles. A Spartan definitely fell into the category of an armoured fighting vehicle.

Another shot echoed, catching him in the side. The rounds glanced off the angled plates, but it still hurt like hell.

Fighting through the pain, John brought the rifle to bear and fire two quick shots. But the Operative ducked the first round missed. The second caught him dead centre. An explosion of sparks enveloped the chest plate, sending the Operative flying back out into the main area.

Not giving him the chance to counter, John quickly pressed his advantage. Dropping the spent rifle, he pulled out his sidearm and switched to full auto.

A stream of torrential fire bashed against the weakened chest plate, punching straight through and crashing against the liquid body

armour. The Operative convulsed as his heart haemorrhaged and gave out.

John breathed a heavy sigh, coughing blood against his visor. None of the rounds made it through the body suit, but the integrity of the plates was virtually gone.

"Blue, report," he wheezed.

Green acknowledgement lights winked.

"They were waiting for us," Fhadjad grimaced, blood covering his shoulder pauldrons.

"They got me good," muttered Maria, limping back out into the open. "I'll live."

John looked at the room Maria had searched, he saw two Agents in full body armour dead just behind the door, and three Operatives beyond.

"Any sign of the President?" John asked.

"Yeah," Cassandra nodded. Holding her stomach. "Dead. Shot to the head."

"Keyes?" John called.

"_We saw everything,"_ Essingdon answered solemnly.

There was a pause on the other end.

"_Go after them, that tunnel only has one way out. I'll slow them down."_

****XXxxxXX****

****ORBITING PRESIDENTIAL PALACE****

Cortez kept the Osprey on the allotted vector, circling over the palace as the storms raged below. Looking out of the viewports, Shepard could see the heavy rain clouds dissipate, and the artificial lighting increasing in strength.

Too damn soon for favoursâ€¦ Jane said inwardly.

"_Commander?"_ it was Keyes. "_Change of plans. I need you and your team to go to these coordinates."_

"Copy that," Shepard answered. "Cortez, set it down."

"Aye ma'am."

The Osprey shuddered as it dipped into the clouds, shields at full in case of a thunder strike. Lightning forked and danced around the craft, licking the protective cocoon. Taking a look at the battlenet, she could see a flight of drones taking an orbiting pattern to provide an uplink to the network.

COM chatter began to Flood through the channels as communications

were restored, but the Presidential Palace was still eerily quiet.

Flying in low, Shepard could see the dark city stretch out before her.

"_A SWAT unit and Mechanised are on site to assist,"_ Keyes mentioned. _"Challenge ID is 'starlight', and countersign is 'oxford'."_

The Osprey touched down in in a park, wedged between the midtown and the suburbs.

"_Dig in, OpFor is coming your way."_

"Any idea who it is?" Shepard asked.

There was a pause.

"_It's Osman."_

Stepping out of the dropship, Shepard and her team jogged out into the open.

"Starlight!" a male voice called out.

"Oxford!" Jane countered. "Anyone come through here?"

The SWAT Commander shook his head.

"No ma'am. Been quiet since we got here," he gestured.

"Sir! We got contacts in bound!"

"Firing positions! Give them the warning!" the FIA Commander ordered.

Shepard readied her rifle and aimed at the tunnel exit.

MAV guns slewed onto the target area, ready to fire fuse HE rounds.

"_Attention! You are surrounded. Surrender now or we will open fire!"_

"Contacts accelerating, sir," an Agent said.

"Open up!"

MAV guns thundered as specialised munitions were thrown out of the barrel at hypervelocity. The rounds streaked through the air, and detonated at the mouth of the tunnel. Balls of smoke and a ripple of air licked at the surface of the water. The shockwaves bashed against the lead vehicle, but did nothing to stop them.

The six Warthogs roared over the partially submerge bridge, parting the water around them in a spectacular fashion as their shields bore the brunt of savage energy. Turrets hatches opened, extending a light turret to fight back.

But six Warthogs weren't going to be enough to break through the checkpoint. Moving into a defensive wedge, the Operatives dismounted the vehicles and began to fight back, trading vicious energy with the Agents and the Mechanised.

Heavy shells continually slammed into the active defence systems, while salvos of plasma splashed onto the shields, causing them to flare and ripple.

"Javik, gonna need your help."

"Yes, Commander."

"On three, we'll topple the middle Hog."

The Prothean nodded.

"One, two, three!"

Shepard pulled in her arm, and pushed forward. A wave of energy cascading from her body in exact cohesion with Javik, a wall of blue and green surged forward, kicking up dirt and grass. Dark Energy slammed into the centre Warthog with such force, rolling the vehicle onto its side.

Rogue Arcani Operatives looked on in shock, the pause costing them precious seconds. Grenadiers from the Mechanised fired their 40mm turrets, quickly overwhelming the active defence systems.

"The one on the left," Shepard panted.

Another surge of power slammed into the next Warthog.

Zeroing in on Jane and Javik, the rogues quickly targeted them. Retreating behind a MAV, Shepard took in a deep breath.

"Damn Lola," Vega muttered. "Think you can do it again?"

Shepard nodded. "Cover us, we'll move to the other side."

Staying low and hugging the prefab covers, the two biotics moved themselves over to the left side of the line.

"Ready?"

Javik nodded.

Like before, a torrent of dark energy thundered through, flipping another Warthog. And that was when the weapons were cast aside.

Operatives tossed their weapons onto the grass in plain sight of the lights. Hands raised, they stepped out from behind the Warthogs, and surrendered.

****XXxxxXX****

****PRESIDENT'S ESCAPE TUNNEL****

Commandeering two armoured Warthogs, the Spartans sped down the

tunnel at break neck speeds. Flood lights illuminated the dark empty cavern.

"Something's coming up on the scanners," Cassandra said.

As Blue team pulled closer, John could hear COM chatter. They were outside of the jammers.

"_This is FIA SWAT Commander Davison; we have the suspects in custody."_

"Did not see that coming," Cassie muttered. "Hoping I could put a few in their chests."

"_Doesn't matter,"_ Keyes voice sounded. _"We have her."_

****XXxxXX****

****ONE HOUR LATER**

>RICHMOND CITY HALL

The moment Essingdon stepped into the room, a series of bright flashes filled his eyes as he walked towards the podium. He wondered if photographers liked to use flash to annoy people, because in this day and age, cameras were powerful enough to take a quick snapshot without leading excessive lighting.

Taking to the podium, he looked out onto the sea of reporters and journalists, waiting to hear what he had to say. It wasn't lost on him that the tabloids had made him the face of sinister espionage, something the ignorant public " like soccer moms and football dads, as well as conspiracy nuts " would eat up quickly.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," Keyes began; his voice soft and grim. "At approximately eight PM UNSC Military Calendar, Westminster suffered a major terrorist attack. It is with a heavy heart that I report, that the President, her family, as well as countless public servants were killed despite the best efforts of military and paramilitary Special Forces."

"General!" a reporter called. "Who are these terrorists? Are they the Unified Rebel Front?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny the involvements of certain insurrectionist groups."

"How did the Flood manage to get onto the Ark? What do people have as reassurances that they won't be turned into mindless parasites?"

"That is unknown at this time. We are doing the best we can to ensure that the parasite will no longer pose a threat for the foreseeable future."

"Is martial law going to be implemented?"

"No. As of this moment, we are recalling all forces back to active standby in the event of an outbreak. Westminster will be on lock down for the immediate future, but there will be no martial law."

"Will there be an increased presence of Law Enforcement?" asked another reporter.

"To my understanding, yes. I'll now leave the stand for the acting governor."

****XXxxxXX****

****EIGHT HOURS LATER**
>RICHMOND HOSPITAL

Despite the casualties, virtually none would survive the encounter with the Flood, leaving a very empty emergency ward.

Flanked by Blue Team in Officer BDUs as well as his personal security detail, Keyes walked to the room where Serin was kept.

The woman suffered a broken femur, lacerations to the abdomen as well as a fraction sternum among other internal bruising that showed up on the scans.

Two street officers stood at the doors, while another three patrolled the floor.

Entering the room, Keyes waved for the SWAT Team to wait outside.

As he stepped into the room, his eyes instinctively looked for any threats. Osman lay in the bed, both arms and legs chained to the metal frame.

"_General Keyes, Director of Military Intelligence as well as acting Commander of the Garrison Force gave a statement last night."_

He had expected her to be asleep, not watching the morning news.

"Relax Serin, it's just me."

"Come here to gloat?"

"Not really my style," Keyes answered.

He turned to the Spartans.

"Leave us," he Commanded.

Serin waited until the doors were closed before she talked.

"Why'd you send them out?" she asked. "Going to have them shoot me from a rooftop?"

Keyes shook his head grimly.

"No," he answered. "They're not cut out for this."

Moving towards Osman's bedside, he cleared his throat.

"I've spent so many years cleaning up after youâ€¦ and what do I get in return? Dead friends."

Osman continued to glare at Keyes.

"She's not here to save you," he said with a sad look in his eyes. "Since you killed President Taylor, there will be no one here to stop me from doing what is necessary."

"You think you'll be the one to kill me?" Serin growled.

Keyes shook his head.

"Civilisation rests on the principles that we treat our criminals than they treated their victims, that we not lower ourselves to their level."

"Poetic," Serin drawled.

"No, what would be poetic is if I called a MAC strike onto the tunnel, letting you be chum for the Flood. But you did kill my friendsâ€ and unfortunately; I was unable to pay the debt."

Osman looked at him quizzically as he reached into his pocket, and placed a small vial onto the table top beside her.

"Despite the best abilities of tired officers, you still managed to smuggle in a cyanide pill because you didn't want to stand trial and rot in some prison."

Serin kept her glare on Essingdon's retreating form.

His hands brushed the door handle.

"Do you remember what you said to me? About there being no good people, on good decisions?"

Osman nodded.

"Well, I trust you'll do what the good people can't."

Walking out of the room, Essingdon felt his hear quiver and his hand shake. He quickly walked towards the toilet, trying not to draw any attention to himself. But his security details were handpicked for a reason. The moment he left Osman, men and women quickly formed a defensive wedge around him. It also didn't help that Blue Team was with him.

"Excuse for a moment. I need to be alone," Keyes said.

The Spartans nodded in compliances, but his security on the other hand.

"Can't do that sir," said Chandler.

Zoey Chandler was someone Greenfield had personally handpicked for Essingdon, something about her being able to read people as well as being a stickler for protocol.

Rethinking his plan, Essingdon decided to use the disabled bathroom instead. That should grant him some level of privacy while his guards could still keep an eye on him instead.

He walked down the hall and into the lavatory. Slapping his hand on the panel, the doors hissed shut as he broke into a light jog for the sink.

His stomach began to lurch as his mouth retched out bile. He hadn't had anything to eat for the past twelve hours, but it seemed his body didn't care as his abs clenched painfully.

"Sir?" Chandler called. "Are you alright?"

"Give me a moment," Keyes said, trying to sound regal.

Tear stung at his eyes as he fought to hold them back. Another retch escaped from his mouth. Grabbing a tissue from the dispenser, he coughed into the rough paper and tossed it into the trash.

Cleaning himself up, Keyes took a deep breath and returned back to his worried guards. Thankful for their discretion, he allowed them to lead the way back to the car.

****XXxxXX****

"_You will know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

>_**-John 8:32**_

****XXxxXX****

****A/N:** And soâ€¦ the story cometh to a close. Thank you so much for being with me since the beginning. Stay tuned for the Epilogue and Author Notes which detail my entire thought process on the story. So if you have any constructive criticisms it's too late now.**

****If you have any questions, odds are they'll be answered in the Author's Notes.****

67. Epilogue

****A/N:** A little send off to you loyal readers out thereâ€¦ who are still with me. =D**

****XXxxXX****

"_I would like to announce my resignation as the Commander in Chief of the Military Intelligence Division."

>_**-GEN Doctor Essingdon Dominic
Keyes**_

****XXxxXX****

****Epilogue (1 year later)****

****23****rd****** Wiltshire Way, Cambridge
>New London City, Greater Ark

Keyes guided his car up to the drive way, and gave a brief ID tag into his security system. A short moment later, the gates opened, allowing him to drive up the small road adorned with a short row of

hedges and ever green trees.

Outside of work, this was where he had spent some of his energy on. The house was built according to his specifications, on a piece of land of his choice; up in the mountains, on a plateau and next to an oasis. The view he had was of the garden harbour city, a beautiful intricate art piece of light and water.

He eased his Rolls-Royce Ghost around the fountain, as a soft smile crossed his lips. It had been the first time since he could spend more than a month here, in peace and quiet. No one knew about his estate, not even the newly appointed Director Greenfield " the first MID civilian Director.

Turning off the engine, he stepped out of the car, and locked the doors before walking up the short flight of stairs. Classical Modern design, he always had a perchance for that, it had the right amount of class, elegance and simplicity that he enjoyed.

After he unlocked the front door, he entered in another series of ID Challenges before closing the door behind him. He had lived so many years as a soldier, and even more so as a powerful figure in a clandestine organisation. But throughout his life, he had been a scientist at heart. He pioneered to create things that would protect mankind, and now" he was at a loss on what to do.

Being in ONI was like a drug, a bittersweet drug " just like war. It would forever be with him, haunt him, and as much as he never wanted to go back, there will always be a small part of him with an insatiable desire to return.

Walking through the foyer, he loosened his tie as he walked up the stairs and across the mezzanine. The chandelier shone brightly, accented by the back lightings on the ceiling. It would've been nice to share all of this with someone, but his lifestyle just didn't allow it. As soldier, fraternisation would get him killed. As a scientist with ONI, women would be used against him, and even more so when he made Section Head.

After becoming the Director, his name was trickled into the public eye. Section II worked hard to keep his identity a secret so that his name would just be a name with a face, and nothing else behind it.

Still, being the Director of ONI would ward off any kind of woman he would be interested in.

He passed through a smaller lounge area before entering his study. It kept in tune with his taste for Classical Modern dÃ©cor, with a redwood and glass desk, ornate lamps, back lighting and rows of bookshelves.

Hanging up his coat, Keyes sat down at his desk, a computer screen with a privacy panel, and an archaic mechanical keyboard. The former Director removed his sidearm from his holster, and gently placed it on his desk. It was so quiet here.

He logged into his computer, still utilising the multi-layered encryption gifted to him by Cortana.

Essingdon guided the cursor to a file of his memoirs, and continued on with his story. He had written every reason behind every action he made, while omitting certain details that would risk the security of MID and the Coalition.

Finishing off the memoirs, he began to seed copies into off site data storage centres, before sending it off to his publisher. He breathed a sigh of relief as he turned away from his computer and stared out the massive windows, gazing upon the garden city below.

Keyes looked down at his smartwatch and entered a call command into the device. The signal was then relayed into his smartphone, before being encrypted and pinged across a network of satellites.

"_Hello?"_ a voice answered apprehensively.

"Anna, how's your first day?" he asked.

"_Donnieâ€| hey. How's retirement?"_

A soft chuckle rumbled through Keyes's chest.

"You didn't answer my question," he said.

"_It's a shitstorm,"_ Greenfield answered tiredly. _"STG's testing our borders, asari are doing massive tech expansions, and turians are expanding their military."_

"We made waves when we returned," Keyes said.

"_You think this peace will last?"_

"Why do you think I resigned?"

"_Yeahâ€| hey. I'm finishing up, wanna meet up for dinner?"_

Aside from his memoirs, Keyes really had nothing better to do.

"Sure. What do you have in mind?"

"_Laos."_

"Okay, I'll meet you there."

He logged off his computer, placed his pistol in his holster and grabbed his coat before heading out. As he reached for the doors of his office, his eyes fell upon the photo taken at the Valedictorian dinner so many centuries ago. Everything just seemed so much easier back then.

Out of every one of his friends, he was the last man standing. The smiles on their faces as the school photographer captured a unique essence of the time. They had finished school, fourteen years of education held in isolation from the rest of the world, now over as they were about to embark on their next adventure.

Keyes gave a sad smile as he longed to be back in that naïve life.

â€|

Essingdon sat down at a table, taking in the aroma of the food, and the family friendly atmosphere.

He looked up at the door and saw a woman walk in. His blood froze as an icy hand cupped his heart, but fear and shock soon gave way to anger as a fire rose in his chest.

Impossible!

She made eye contact with him, and gave a hollow smile as she walked towards his table. Gently, she pulled out the chair, and sat down, hands clasped. She looked like any other woman enjoying a night out, dressed in jeans and a blouse.

"The hell are you doing here?" Essingdon hissed.

"I'd like to chat."

"Where's Greenfield?" he growled, his fingers brushing against the hilt of the knife.

"Stuck in traffic," Parangosky simpered, raising her hand to allay his concerns. "I just want to talk."

"What's there to talk about? Serin's out of the picture and you are on the run."

Margaret gave a low chuckle.

"I'm not the only one in this game, Essingdon."

"You can tell your friends, the FIA will be coming after them. Executive order."

"I know, and that's why I want to give you this."

Reaching into her pocket, Parangosky produced a thumb drive and placed it onto the blackwood table.

"This is a peace offering. It has all the names of my associates, their contacts, and assets."

"What's in it for me?"

"Greenfield can monitor these people. But you and I both know there won't be arrests. Like it or not, some of our tech has slipped through the cracks. This network will keep us on top."

"Pre-emptive strikes, proxy wars and cyberwarfare," Keyes muttered.

"Use this to make sure humanity never comes under attack again."

Essingdon shifted in his seat.

"What makes you think I'm still in it?" he asked.

"No one really leaves," Margaret answered cryptically. "Enjoy your dinner."

Slowly, Parangosky lifted herself from her seat, and left with only a pair of blue eyes following her wake.

Waiting another half minute, Essingdon fished into his pocket for his phone. He activated the palm sized device, and entered a quick message to Anna.

MOP met me at the placeâ€¦ handed me a drive.

Placing his phone back down on the table, he waited for a reply.

Haha. Very funny.

I'm serious, Keyes texted back.

Right. What she do? Sit down and eat with you?

I haven't ordered yet.

Well order. I'm walking.

Alright, see you soon.

"Essi, what are you planning? You always do this before you do something stupid."

"Can't be that bad," he joked. "I'm still here aren't i?"

****XXxxXX****

****Elysian Fields, Greater Ark****

Civilian life, it was something that John had rarely if ever, experienced it in its vanilla form. The war against the Covenant still felt quite raw, fresh in the back of his mind, just like it would be for Miranda Keyes. But unlike her, he never had the luxury of shore leave.

He wasn't stupid or naïve; he knew exactly why he rarely had the chance to leave the base. It was because there was nothing for him outside of the military life. He'd probably been to a bar once or twice because of some thankful soldiers who wanted to give him a treat. Or maybe it was ONI trying to keep an eye out for him.

Either way, whenever he was away from the battlefields, there was always a mission in mind. If he was in the cities, it was to help take down an Insurrectionist cell.

Standing on the patio of his villa was something surreal. He had a home now, a place to rest outside of the military barracks. It was his place to call his own, away from the prying eyes and those eager to learn of the man behind the gold visor.

Turning away from the breath taking coastal sight, John turned

towards the door and entered into his new home.

Pushing open the rich timber door, he found himself inside a tastefully mix of classical and contemporary interior design accented by redwood and glass furniture. The Spartan had never been much for finer things in life. He never had the chance. But guessing by the way how his home was designed, he assumed Keyes might've had a hand in it. It seemed so much in line with the scientist's tastes.

Not an unpacked box insight, everything had been placed neatly, giving the estate both a showroom and homey touch. In time the showroom aspect would disappear. John took another look around the foyer, taking in the sight of the grand marble staircase and the ornate chandelier that hang over the water fountain.

"Home," he whispered quietly.

The Spartan set down the hall, listening to the ambiance of the home, straining his ears to pick up the cries of the sea ravens and the soft swirls of the waves. Easing himself onto the couch in the main lounge, he interfaced with the home entertainment and turned on the news.

So this was what normalcy was like, calm and dull. But he could see the beauty of it all, to be caught up in worries that weren't really life or death, where only the mundane was the worst to happen. John certainly envied the people who had managed to be left unscathed from war.

The door bells chimed, bringing him out of thought. Lifting himself out of the firm leather sofa, John quickly jogged back to the main atrium and opened the doors.

"Nice place," Shepard beamed. "Got us pasta andâ€¦"

"Chocolate frappes," John finished.

"You betcha."

Walking back into the living space, Shepard placed the takeaway pesto linguini onto the black marble counter top, and fished for some cutlery in the drawers. Her eyebrows arched slightly when she saw a fine crafted silver fork with excellent weight.

"So, Keyes set you up with this?" she asked. "Final orders before retiring."

John nodded, picking up a container.

Essingdon's resignation was something that had dominated the news cycle for days. He even appeared on a few talk shows and news stations to answer questions; some were more professional than others, and most asked him about what he planned to do after his resignation, while others dared venture into polcies.

"I'm impressed. Love how the back is facing the mountain. Unlike Hock's house."

"What was wrong with Hock's mansion?" John asked.

"Great view and all, but the back of the house was hanging off a cliff, I dunno, it felt like I was going to fall over backwards. Nervous tick I suppose," Jane shrugged.

John nodded.

"Soâ€¦ any plans for tonight? Or the month?"

The Spartan shrugged. "Long service leave. Not sure."

"My advice, spend the first month doing nothing. It works trust me," Jane said. "Then the second month, you start planning trips."

John tilted his head slightly.

"You're on leave next month."

Shepard grinned.

"Exactly. I'll grab the team together, we'll have fun."

****XXxxxXX****

****Keyes's Private Estate****

Essingdon ran his eyes over the final paragraph of his memoirs one last time and breathed a sigh of relief. He had devoted the past few months to this little hobby of his, but something about his meeting with Parangosky unnerved him. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand as his heart thrummed uneasily.

Reaching into his drawer, Keyes pulled out a pistol and placed it by his mouse, scanning his surroundings warily. He over to his right hand, resting against the cool metal alloy of the weapon, his finger resting on the trigger guard as his thumb brushed against the safeties.

"I'm not a patriotâ€¦ patriotism ruins history and somehow manage to justify the worst of crimes. But I am far from a saint as well. I served my nation to protect those closest and dearest to me," he read. "And I find myself holding plenty of regrets, most of them about the decision I madeâ€¦ everything else just seems trivial."

****XXxxxXX****

"_Today, former Director of the Military Intelligence Division, has been found dead in his home in an apparent suicide. The Director's death has been greeted with enthusiasm by some, and general scepticism by critics, but most were saddened by his sudden departure. We got to Alice Crenshaw with more on the storyâ€¦"
>_**~Daniel Sellers, News Anchor for CCN**_

"_Thank you, Daniel. I'm standing outside of the former Director's home, where local Law Enforcement and the FIA have set up a perimeter. Sceptics have questioned if the General's death was actually suicide, retribution from Insurrectionists, remnant rogue ONI factions, or a cover for him to disappear. It is believed that he

will be given full military honours at his funeral, with Chief of Staff from all branches expected to be in attendanceâ€|"

>_**-Alice Crenshaw, domestic correspondence for CCN**_

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XXxxXX AUTHOR NOTES XXxxXX

Author's notes for Lost Legacy

So if you've made it this far, you have finished reading my story. My thanks for being with me on this literary journey, and my sincerest appreciations for your support.

So I guess this is the part where I answer a few questions and explain a few things about _Lost Legacy_.

As some of you may know, this story had a rocky start, initially underperforming the predecessor story, _Humanity's Legacy_. This story was laced with horrific infractions generally committed by a mid-teen writer (and still is until the rewrites go through â€" if ever).

In a way, this story was something I worked on during the most defining years of my life, and I feel that it has allegorically documented my understanding of the world around me. So finishing thisâ€| well, it feels weird to have finished this story. I devoted so much of my free time to it; I'm both happy and sad that it's practically over. We still have the rewrites to go, but that won't be quite the same.

Of course one thing has been made painfully clear to me when I was writing the final chaptersâ€| I was losing touch of my original vision, and that the ending was definitely something that would never reach expectations.

You see, I had originally planned for this story to go for about 150k-200k words max, and it would be a story that would have the galaxy fighting the Flood. Of course, I started writing this story when I was sixteenâ€| almost four years ago. And things change of course. Not to mention sixteen year old me didn't have the foresight to have an overarching plot of some kind â€" rewriting Mass Effect can only go so far.

I couldn't bring myself to write a curb stomp storyâ€| not unless I have fleshed out characters who feel real to me. So _Lost Legacy_ took a turn to being character driven, and I started introducing my own characters to set the scene. But once again, I lost touch with my original vision, and the story was side trackedâ€| a lot.

Still, I promised myself to continue on and finish this story. Not for the readers, but for me. I wanted to finish this story off, and though I wanted it to be on a high note, it wasn't possible, not if we take into account how the themes of the story has changed and evolved as the years grew by for me.

As selfish as this soundsâ€| I wanted to complete this story for me, to tie it off, to give me some measure of closure.

So once again, if you are still here. Thank you for your support.

â€|

****Where to now?**

>Well, my post-school plans didn't turn out the way I had expected. Instead of being in uni for three or four years, I'm looking at about a decade's worth of tertiary education now. So I think it'll be rare occurrence for me to be updating on a weekly basis like I used to.

However, don't be too alarmed, I'll do my best to update on a fortnightly (probably not) or a monthly basis.

I guess a story I'll be focusing my energy on the most would be the recent _Blackzone First Contact_, and _Ghost Raider Tomb Recon_. I do have another (that's right, another) Halo/Marvel crossover in the works and another Halo/ME story on the wayâ€| _Shadow Contingency_.

Halo/Comic Crossovers seem to fall flat for meâ€| maybe because I have too many ideas floating around.

If you want to keep up to date with _Shadow Contingency_ go to the Tumblr page at **** shadowcontingency . tumblr **** and keep up with more news at **** andrithir . tumblr ****

â€|

If there are any chapters you feel that I should touch up. Feel free to tell me in the review. In order to alert you when a new rewrite has been posted, I'll just post a notification in the form of a chapter.

â€|

****Plot Elements:****

****Same universe (or alternate universe):**

>I got tired of the whole inter-dimensional jump theme, since there were a number of stories out there that executed it poorly. But _In the Shadows of Gods_ did that quite well in my opinion, it was and is one of my favourites.

Essentially, I ripped the idea out of my own story; _Humanity's Legacy_ and applied it to _Lost Legacy_. The reason being is because I wanted to have both the Alliance and the UNSC exist without really overlapping until later on the arc. That way we could have a compare and contrast.

However, there was a risk of turning this story into a stomp fest so a few things had to be adjusted appropriately to stop that from happening; mainly the espionage theme that came in closer to the end of the story.

****ME2 Arc:**

>Well that part is pretty much self-explanatory. But I wanted to explore the ME2 Arc mainly because it was a path no one had

explored completely â€" albeit the original version of my story, in my own opinion, fails to convey that element across effectively.

Hopefully in the rewrite, I'll be able to explore all of John's interactions with the _Normandy_ crew more effectively, as well as developed Shepard more.

****ME3 Arc:**

>I guess we have this to blame for why I rushed the ME2 Arc so badly. I wanted to get to ME3, where the fun was. Most stories on this fandom (in the early stages of this story) only focused on ME1 and then fell flat.

*****Post" ME3 Arc:**

>This was when the UNSC began to pull focus. Totally unintentional, but it was a side effect due to the espionage direction I was taking this story. Soâ€| the Reapers quickly lost their fear factor and were replaced by the Flood.

I had built this up so much that the only way it could end without an espionage theme, was just a ludicrous battle between the forces of evil and good â€" an extreme clichÃ© that has no real substance to it.

****Flood:**

>We needed the good ol'scary enemy back. But of course, there was one way that this could end, and that was a huge scale war that would leave little room for character-driven plot, which this story had turned into.

****Espionage/conspiracy:**

>At some point in the story, I realised that I had set up an excellent foundation for this type of story. I also realised that a battle between "good and bad" was clichÃ©. Furthermore, it felt a bit redundant due to the portrayal of everyone in this story.

Since this story was also character-driven, an espionage theme made sense as it retained the grittiness of Halo first trilogy which I hoped I had managed to emulate.

â€|

****Characters/Entities:****

I had put in a few too many own characters in the storyâ€| probably why I ended up killing most of them off.

****John as a Commander:**

>I decided to have the Chief as Commander as he is senior officer material, and I wanted him to be Shepard's equal, not a subordinate. As a character, I must say he was the hardest to develop, because Bungie originally wanted the player to project themselves onto the Chief. But thanks to 343i we see John as more of a human.

In my opinion, silent characters are the hardest to define since we all have varying opinions of them. But remember what makes them more real is that they have that slight inconsistency. We all have that slight inconsistency in our personality, something that no one would

ever guess.

****Why FemShep?**

>Originally, I was planning to go with BroShep, but I decided to go with FemShep in the end as she would make a better "pal" for the Chief in Cortana's absence.

I'm not going to lie, at first her character was a bit of a Mary Sue to me. I needed to change her, but gradually though. And I must say, I am pleased with the end result. She feels like an exemplary human who has her flaws, and helps us understand the Chief through a more personal perspective.

****Essingdon Dominic Keyes:**

>I felt that it was necessary to create a character who is an intellect like Doctor Halsey. But unlike his mother, I wanted Keyes to be a person who could take on the mantle of becoming Head of ONI. He's a compassionate and rational person, but also capable of being cold and calculative.

****Sarah Palmer:**

>Well, Palmer is a very difficult person to define. My first impression of her was a female Johnson, which was pleasant. I think many people misunderstood her when she said to the Chief, "I thought you'd be taller."

Palmer says that in a teasing manner, it's a common thing amongst officers (and she was flirting with him), basically your typical bravado. Her arrogant behaviour is usually to reign in the outlandish Spartans and keep them in line, when the chips are down however; Palmer does what she can to make sure her people get through alive. That's a good thing for the most partâ€¦ but it could be done without.

Then we delve a bit more into the canonâ€¦

>Most of the time though, I see Sarah as the gung-ho gun tooting Marine who has little respect for others outside her outfit. That's not a good thing. In fact, her ignorance and arrogance annoyed the hell out of me. She felt like a new stereotypeneric character, and I genuinely thought 343i would make her more real. Because let's face it, the S4s feel like a joke.

I poured in a lot of time and effort turning her character around into someone more admirable. Though, no one can be Johnson, BUT JOHNSON!

****ONISAD:**

>Believe it or not, I came up with this while I was talking about the story with a friend (Yi-Chun). We discussed the topics of adding more characters and ended up with "Fifth Element". I then went home and developed the idea even further, coming up with ONISAD, and "Fifth Element," being one of the Special Operations Group's units.

>ONISAD is based loosely off the Mossad, CIASAD and Third Echelon from the Splinter Cell series.
Overtime, the idea developed into a full-blown aspect with what many of you have described as "very human characters."

In a way, I think I've unintentionally made them the lenses in which we can all relate to, so that we could let the godly characters

remain godly.

****Alec "Saps" Herschon:**

>I had originally wanted to have Saps take on the mantle of humour that had been left behind when Lotus was killed off. But eventually, I realised that no one could replace Lotus. So instead, I opted for Saps to be the "go to" for tech issues, and give him a dry sense of humour with an unholy love for puns.

I wanted to develop him more, but he was introduced a bit late into the story. Regardless, he'll have his time in the sun in another fic.

****Sandman:**

>He was going to be the more light hearted but still serious counterpart to Arca.

****Arca:**

>Thought it wasn't my intention, Arca eventually became the overall symbolisation of what it meant to be in ONISAD. He's something that could be considered as a "tragic poster-boy" for the organisation.

****Lotus:**

>Who doesn't love a bit of humour laced with insanity?

****Greystone:**

>For the life of meâ€¦ I don't know why I killed him off. Maybe it was to add more emotional effect? May have to review it later in the rewrite.

****Lori Anders:**

>What I had embodied Anders with, was what I had originally hoped (canon) Palmer to be, a caring leader with a light hearted demeanour around her peers, while not being afraid to do wetworks. In a way, I made her, Paragon Shepard.

I wished I had time to develop her character more, but like Saps, she'll get her time in the sun in a future story.

****Airborne:**

>Need I say more?

****Margaret Orlenda Parangosky:**

>I couldn't make her a totally evil person for the sake of being evil. So I decided to go with the _misunderstood_ character, like The Illusive Man.

Throughout the story, I've made her motives unclear, and left that up to interpretation. But considering the amount of "distaste" being voiced, I realised I was being too vague and had to spell out a few things.

So Parangosky created Cerberus as a means of keeping an eye on the galaxy, and manipulate a different line of human technological and social evolution. The end result being that humanity made rapid leaps, whilst having less wars and violent conflicts.

This was hinted in the fact that the UEG's history was the one that

had the terrible world wars and interplanetary conflicts, whereas the Alliance was virtually spotless.

Further hints that Parangosky was manipulating the Alliance was due to the fact that everyone spoke English and had books on ancient Greece, but there was virtually no trace of the UNSC or any material relating to them.

â€|

****Influences:**

>There are a number of people I would like to thank. First and foremost is Sam for continuing this story on when I couldn't. Next is _Rirey, Arec (or Alistair), _and _Yi-Chun_ for supporting through the years, and putting up with my wacky ideas during school. Special thanks goes to _Arec_ and _Carleen_ for beta work.

****Tech:**

>Like any good nerd, I watched ample amounts of physics and biology documentaries as well as doing research, to gage a human timeline of evolution. Of course, a few things had to be toned down, otherwise everything in this story would be too unbelievable.

â€|

****Deleted Scenes:****

A bunch of segments I had decided to cut out from the story, early on.

****Deleted Scene #1 Rewrite â€" Fight â€" Chief vs Alliance Team****

**This scene is the fight between Shepard and Chief. But due to rationality, it was taken out. After all, why the hell should you trust a man that wiped out the team?**

The room was tense; everyone looked back and forth between themselves and the green armoured behemoth that stood at the end of the room. Jane didn't know who fired first, or maybe everyone fired at the same time, but after that first shot, pandemonium had ensured.

She knew she couldn't take on that kind of entity in light armour alone, but thankfully she had a few people to back her up. And by few, that included a squad of 81st Commandos, a team of N7s and her own personal cadre.

"Fan out and suppress!" Shepard ordered.

The teams fanned out, sidestepping as they lay down a volume of fire at the behemoth. Valkyries hissed and barked as they hurled armour piecing rounds down range. Streaks of gold peppered at the armoured entity. But they were all blocked by shields. A different type though, instead of sky blue, they flared gold.

Though the being stayed in the open for the barest second before retreating behind cover. The N7 Destroyer spooled up his Typhoon, filling the air with a thunderous chain saw and an unforgiving amount of flying bullets. His Hawk Missile got a lock and streaked down the

hall. A split second later there was the thump of the explosion.

"Boo!" a deep baritone voice growled.

Shepard spun round just in time to see the walking tank stand behind the N7 Operative. It or he delivered a powerful kick to the chest, sending the Operative flying into a desk. The surface snapped under the force, and the man still kept on going until he was stopped by the cubicle walls.

That was the moment that every paused for a split second. Not even a Krogan could've pulled that off so effortlessly. But before anyone could get a bead on the man, he had disappeared.

"Stay together," Shepard said calmly. "Biotics, flare up."

An even cluster of singularity fields formed into existence around the cavernous room. Desk chairs were plucked from the ground, dangling helplessly in the air. Jane panned her eyes across the singularities deployed on an overwatching mezzanine. She caught a faint outline, a warping of air.

Gotcha.

In the moment it took a heart to beat, eldritch encased Shepard as she hurled two biotic kinetic bolts towards her target. The impact rolled across him and dissipated like a fading cloud.

The fuck?

That should've knocked him down. Shepard was renowned for being able to toss Krogans across the room without a sweat. But at least the rest of the biotics followed suit.

"Eat this!" Jack sneered.

A powerful shockwave rippled through the air, detonating the singularity fields and shattering the chairs. The being stumbled a bit for the briefest moment before disappearing once more.

That shouldn't have happened!

Shepard had seen hulking Mechs be torn apart by Jack's shockwaves, but they just hit the being as if they were nothing more than waves in the water.

"Where is he? Anyone got a bead?" One of the Commandos asked.

"I've got nothing."

"Someone check on Henry," an N7 said.

Jane panned her eyes back and forth across the office area.

"Where are you?" she whispered.

"Here."

Without warning, Jane felt the wind knock out of her lungs as she was

sent flying through the air. Before she knew it, she had crashed through a glass plane and skidded to a halt in an executive office. Pain rippled and coursed throughout her body as she tried to move. She felt blood trickle down her cheeks, cut by the glass.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered, pulling herself up.

She wasn't too badly hurt, her biotic shields and kinetic barriers had taken most of the brunt. Though she suspected that her biotics didn't do much to save her.

Outside, Shepard could hear the chatter of guns and flare of biotic energy. She vaulted over the shattered glass and re-entered the main office area. The remaining men were firing at anything that moved. A few lay slumped against the desks; smoke curling up from the smouldering holes.

Non-lethal shots. No bleedings. Possible DEW, Shepard concluded.
Shit.

She quickly linked up with Kasumi, who seemed to have all the blood drained out of her face.

"Shep, if we survive. I'm going to kill you."

"Get in line, Kasumi."

Jane spotted Jack in the distance. It looked like the convict had spotted their armoured _friend_. She charged up, flaring a deep violet before shooting off in a beam of blue. She slammed into the behemoth at breakneck speeds, he should've gone flying back into the wall. Instead, he just back stepped as if it was nothing.

Jack looked dazed; her eyes barely registered the fist that slammed into her stomach. She doubled over and was out for the count.

"Shit," Shepard muttered. "Everyone, fry him!"

All the tech savvy fighters in the room aimed an overlord at the entity. Before he could engage his cloak, thousands of volts surged through his armour, overloading his shields and frying his cloak.

â€|

The alarm blared inside John's helmet. This was not how it was supposed to go. Already, he had what looked like some form of pseudo-magic or unexplored form of scientific application, on his hands. Without cloak or shields, the Spartan would have to go on a suicidal offensive.

He raised his weapon again, flicked it to full-auto and squeezed the trigger. The entire room lit up with a violent blue pulse. Sparks were sent flying as the metal surfaces were hit. One of the lances struck a soldier in the shoulder blade, putting her out of the fight.

As the SCAR let a wave of savage energy surge, John scanned for the woman who appeared to be the leader. He remembered that she was

dressed in casual clothing, but had combat armoury over it. Special Ops clearly.

Quickly, the OpFor recovered and returned fire. John strafed left, sidestepping while keeping his aim steady. Rounds ricochet off his armour, leaving scratches or a sizeable dent in their wake. The Spartan scolded himself for not being a hard enough target and sprinted to the other side of the room. He needed to take the fight to melee. At least he'd have a chance to use his superior physical capabilities to his advantage.

"_Alert, energy spike detected,"_ his internal speakers whispered. An indicator flashed on his HUD.

The Chief turned around just in time to see an electric tsunami surge through him. That amount of power would've killed him if it weren't for the armour.

"_Systems damaged, sensors offline."_

John swore inwardly. Though Mendez taught everyone to not rely on their tech, the MJOLNIR's Advance Spectral Scanner and VISR system provided an unparalleled tactical advantage. No longer able to see the red outlines of his enemy, the Spartan was now forced to play on a bit more even grounds.

He knelt behind a cubicle wall, and reloaded his weapon. But the hair on the back of his neck stood on ends. He spun round just in time and feinted left, just as a sword based his head and cut through the dividers. The blade wielded was a woman, dressed in form fitting armour designed for agility and mobility.

Without hesitation, John wrapped his finger around her wrist and squeezed. He heard her bones snap and her cries filled the room. The Spartan reached down to his holster and drew his pistol, planting two rounds centre mass. He didn't know if the shot was fatal, because by the time he had let go, a blue wave crashed into him.

He was hurled a few meters back, but it was vastly disproportionate consider how far the desk and cubicle walls were sent flying. The Spartan turned to face the source. Three females, two human, one unknown, possibly asari according to the Forerunner archives. Reported to have a telekinesis kind of ability which John assumed to be the blue surges of power. But it also appeared humans had access to that kind of technology or ability.

The geared up for another attack, blue bolt leapt out from their hands like a plasma torpedo. With superior reflexes, John ducked and dived, letting the energy sail by him. But it put him out in the open. All trained guns opened fire, shredding the marble floor around him. He felt a sharp pain spread from his left shoulder. Someone had scored a lucky shot. The armour penetrating rounds had found its mark in the exposed joints where the articulated plates couldn't protect him. Luckily, the round had penetrated the outer layer of the exosuit, and was stopped by the second layer. It still hurt like hell though since there was nothing to spread the impact.

John rolled to his left, raised his SCAR and fired back. Men and women ducked behind cover. He had them on their back foot now. Time to take advantage of it. The Spartan switched his weapon over to

laser, and began his psychological warfare.

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****Deleted Scenes #2 - Chapter 2 Reclamation (Rewrite) â€"**
Escape**

But the Admiral never finished. A loud explosion went off; it was like standing next to a spaceship's flaring engines. The light was so intense that it was like looking at a sun. Shepard collapsed onto the tiled floor, clutching her head and eyes as bells rang.

It was excruciating, but training had taught her how to overcome the effects of a flashbang grenade. She quickly blinked, took in a few deep breaths and blinked a few times to clear her vision. When her senses became bearable again, Shepard heard the sound of droning alarmsâ€| and the missing armour.

"Where the hell did it go?" she almost cried out.

Jane pulled herself up, and looked around the lab frantically. She doubled back to the makeshift firing range and skidded to a halt, bracing herself against the door frame. But the weapons were gone. She ran back over to the elevator to get to the catwalk. Entering in a few keys, the platform lifted her back up to the overhanging walkway.

She sprinted across the metal grating, her boots thundering across the surface. The Spectre threw a quick glance back to the armour station and saw Hackett and Verner recovering.

"_Attention all Alliance personnel, you are to engage without lethal force. Target is an armouredâ€| entity. Green and approximately seven feet. I repeat, you are not to use lethal force!"_ Hackett broadcasted.

Jane used her abilities of biotic distortion to propel herself a beam of blue light to the main elevator shaft. She swore inwardly when she saw the doors ripped apartâ€| and melting. It looked like precision _slashes_.

The fuck?

She pushed past, careful not to touch the red hot edges. It was times like these she wished she had armour insteadâ€| it didn't help that because of the Australian summer â€" in the tropics â€" she was just wearing casual clothes, specifically the ones she wore to the dig site, minus the jacket and replaced the boots with sneakers for comfort. Definitely not the kind of clothes Shepard would go looking for a fight inâ€| not for fashion purposes but simply because they weren't durable enough to when she started using biotics.

As she entered the shaft, she looked up and saw the disabled elevator. Hugging the sides, Jane propelled herself onto the maintenance ledge and used the ladders as a foothold to launch herself up. She couldn't see the _thing_. It probably had active cloaking, but she couldn't definitely hear it.

"_Commander Shepard, sitrep,"_ Hackett ordered over the COMs.

"In pursuit of HVI," she replied breathlessly.

"_Be careful. It could be confused."_

A sharp crackle echoed through the shaft. Shepard zeroed in on the source, and saw a glowing made, violet and wrapped in wispy tendrils. She heard the spark and sputter as it burned through the metal doors up ahead.

"Target is leaving the shaft, it's on the ground floor," Jane broadcasted.

Unlike the (assumed) UNSC Bunker, the Alliance Research and Testing Facility was mostly above ground, with the more sensitive equipment placed a hundred meters below the surface.

Damn it's fast, she thought.

Reaching out with her fingers, Shepard caught a hold of the ground floor platform and pulled herself up. Entering the neatly decorated white and blue theme of the hallway, she passed the knocked out guards and sprinted down.

Must've played possumâ€¦ smart.

She propelled herself into the foyer; there were civilian staff starring shock at the shattered main doors. No one had a clue to what was going on.

Secondary alarms began to blare.

"_Attention all personnel, this facility has been compromised. All non-essentials please proceed to the evacuation points. This is an Alpha Priority One evacuationâ€¦"_

Jane wondered what the hell the thing was planning. Its actions weren't hostile per say. It hadn't killed anyone at this base as far as she was concerned anyway. Logically, it would've revealed itself. Or maybe Verner had found out too much and it was doing contingency.

â€¦

****Khalida Gym****

**Written by Yi-Chun. It was an idea of his, that I eventually toned down and worked it into one of the later chapters.**

"_Khalida Gym ladies and gentlemen, the moment you step inside that gym, phrases like "Do you even lift?" and "Can you spot me?" go right out the windowâ€¦ this isn't a gym for some Helljumpersâ€¦ this is a gym for the Spartans."_

_-Sergeant A. Booth, Exemplar Military Academy _

The gyms back in the 20th Century on Earth were organizations that provided the civilians with a range of facilities designed to improve and maintain the physical fitness and health of both man and woman alike. However as the human race progressed with technology and the introduction of their Supersoldiers certain specifications had to be

made to allow the Spartans to maintain their peak physical condition, thus, the _Khalida_ gyms were introduced. Besides there was a limit to how much intimidation a standard marine could receive until he'd decide to stop going to the gym entirely.

All of the weights inside _Khalida_ immediately started at 50kg and kept rising, heavy metal pumped out of the speakers to provide the Spartans with the pump required to complete the final rep in their routine. This wasn't a gym where there was time for women to glance at the chiseled bodies of men nor for men to stare at the parts of women there were only two rules in _Khalida_ Gym; Work hard, and most importantlyâ€¦ focus.

Riley walked into the silver room followed by Blaze and Viper, the small group wore their PT gear, looking across the room the gym was essentially full at this point of the day, the trio walked briskly across the carpeted floor.

Ropes hung from the roof as Spartans climbed up and down achieving the burn in their core with speed similar to a colony of ants moving up and down a tree branch. Nearby others would lift weights faces barely showing any sign of struggle as sweat glistened off their skin, however what stood out most in the gym was The Ring.

The sparring ring inside _Khalida_ allowed the Supersoldiers to fight to their hearts content and it was here that Riley had found her, the one who had supposedly fired the bullet that killed Adrian. Captain Lori Anders â€" nicknamed by her squad as Coriander â€" had an impressive military history. Originally born on Elysian Fields, into a wealthy family, her parents were the good sorts. They raised her well, taught her and guided her to be modest and kind, firm and unyielding. She had the traits of a born leader, and the marks of war to prove it. She could've gone on to become a lawyer, maybe a politician and in a stretch, a model.

But she chose a different path. No one, not even her family would've ever imagined her becoming a Supersoldier let alone Force Recon. Yet she did it, she became a Marine and climbed through its unique Special Forces hierarchy until becoming an ODST and working her way into the infamous 105th. With such exemplary performance it was without a doubt she would become a Spartan-IV.

He couldn't imagine her being able to kill a fellow comrade, not with the psychological profile he gathered. Papers and documents could be wrong however, no other form of evaluation was better than a bit of a spar.

Walking along the edges of The Ring, Riley instinctively catalogued every piece of equipment sitting on the dark carpet. Anders was running a fresh Spartan-IV team through some drills. Where Crimson-One was, he didn't know. She had her dark strawberry blonde hair tied into a ponytail, and wore standard PT gear; form fitting singlet and shorts.

"Well, well, well. This group looks like a boring bunchâ€¦" Viper muttered, he stood arms across his chest; a stern stare followed the movements of the Spartan-IVs.

Blaze stood next to his brother as he analyzed the movements of those below him.

"Agreed, half these people are just doing the same thing over and over again," Blaze gave a lighthearted chuckle.

"That's because they're running drills Blazeâ€¦ you're supposed to do the same thing over and overâ€¦" Riley chided, he looked over at the younger soldier with an eyebrow raised.

"Right... knew thatâ€¦ duhâ€¦" Blaze replied. Viper shot his brother a "are you serious" look.

Riley however wasn't focused on the banter the two would conjure, he concentrated on Anders as she provided yet another example of arrastÃ£o, a classic leg takedown. The simple drive as Anders pushed her opponent backwards sending his face into the ground followed by a guillotine choke made Riley winceâ€¦ along with the rest of the Spartan IV cohort. Immediately a medic team rushed on tending to the face of the fallen man.

"A broken nose and a fractured jaw, ouch," he thought.

Obviously Riley had been staring for too long since Anders turned and stared right back.

"See something you like Sandman?" she flashed a smile.

"Just observing Corianderâ€¦ Seems like you can handle yourself well," he replied, straight off the first impression he didn't like her.

"That's right we can see stuff we like perfect from up here darling!" A yell could be heard from Viper. He gave a wink. Blaze snickered next to him.

"Would you like an even closer look?" She winked back. The smile remained on her face.

Viper looked to Riley as if for approval. Riley smiled, he'd been waiting for this moment all day. He nodded.

"Have fun, but try not to hurt her too much" he goaded.

"With pleasureâ€¦" Viper muttered a serious look crept on his face, "Blaze, on me."

The two jumped into The Ring landing softly on the ground, it was here that the two operatives sized up their opponentâ€¦ their opponent had at least half a head on them.

"Hey Coriander hope you're ready to beâ€¦ vlazed!" Viper curled his hands into fists on the word, obtaining a serious stance - Blaze mirrored his brother's movement.

Coriander stood her ground straight as a statue and unimpressed. "Vlazed?" she raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

"It's a combination of the names of my brother and I, it's a term used to describe-" Viper began.

"Broâ€¦ shut up." Blaze whispered through clenched teeth.

"What?" Viper looked at his brother. His stance loosened â€" Blaze did likewise.

"If you explain the reason you just sound stupid!" Blaze whispered.

Anders chuckled and made a move.

The slide was flawless, along with the leg sweep that followed, Viper found himself in the air.

"Son of a-" was all Blaze managed as he regained his posture and made an attempt at an attack. A powerful right hook flew out, which was blocked easily by Anders.

[Insert fight scene here that eventually leads to the following sequence]

Viper swung as Anders ducked under the attack, grabbing Viper's right arm he could feel the grip tighten.

"Shit." Was the only word that entered his head.

In a brutal manoeuver Anders lifted Viper's arm over her head and brought it down crunching over her shoulder, all in The Ring could hear the snapping of bone.

A yell of pain came from Vipers throat as he was flipped onto his back and pinned.

"Get a good look?" she muttered.

"Not bad Andersâ€¦ I like you," he said through clenched teeth, the pain wasn't going to disappear very quickly.

Riley had watched the whole scene unfold, the execution of counters and brutal offensive strikes had been flawlessâ€¦ he could see why Keyes wanted to recruit her.

"Oi! My turn," he yelled from the top of viewing platform. Rolling up his left sleeve up he allowed himself to fall to the mat.

As he landed his left hand formed into a claw like pose with his fist at his side.

"Last time a woman joined Fifth Element I didn't exactly like herâ€¦ No way I'm letting someone like you just stroll on in," a smirk moved across his face.

"Rightâ€¦ this coming from the guy that's got his pose set up like a woman," she chuckled and took her stance of her own. Fists clenched and legs spread apart, she could feel this fight would be good.

[Insert fight scene here that eventually leads to the following sequence]

Riley had left his upper body exposed; there was the opening that Anders had been searching for. Like a panther Anders leapt off her

right leg quickly pushing off her left allowing her the momentum to send a deadly left punch into his ribs.

A look of pain came across his face as he felt two ribs break and another crack. A flimsy left hook was all he could maintain as a counter; easily blocked a deadly punch into his right bicep rendered it useless. Anders was still quick, kicking her opponent back Riley stumbled. Regaining a posture she ran up locked her legs around Riley's head.

"Viperâ€¦ you're gonna wanna see this!" Blaze helped his brother sit up from the stretcher on the sidelines.

"No way," both brothers watched as Riley was flipped and brought down into a guillotine choke, with only his left arm left the operative struggled for air.

"GG," the brothers muttered at the same time.

â€¦

****Keyes's final confrontation****

"You think you'll be the one to kill me?"

"No," Keyes chuckled. "My friend is."

He nodded to John, before stepping back into the shadows.

"I'm just going to watch," he said with an eerie mirth.

Stepping from the shadows, the Spartan squeezed the trigger in quick succession. A series of whiplash hisses rippled across the room as three rounds punctured Osman's chest. The woman doubled over, heaving, breathing with a laboured effort.

She looked up at her killer, her eyes empty but saddened, hoping to see the blue eyes of her former brother in arms. But he said nothing.

Pulling out his sidearm, he brought the barrel to bear and fired. Osman's head was wrenched back violently as blood and brain splattered onto the carpet floor behind her. The thud of her body resonated throughout the silent office.

****Removed themes:****

****Romance:**

>Aside from the people who would scream "bloody murder" if I put in a romance, I don't have real experience writing romancesâ€¦ nor can I draw on my own personal experiences. ****[Cries quietly]****

****Galaxy vs Flood:**

>The finale, or the epic battle was going to be between the galaxy and the Flood. But I had already created this intricate web of espionage throughout the story, I opted out of this plotline.

So no real spoilers were given when I wrote _Trust_.

â€|

****Source material:****

Obviously the original _Halo Trilogy_ and the books written by Nylund were relied on heavily._ Halo 4_ came in a bit later, and I wasn't too sure how to work it in. I think it all worked out. Elements from the _Halo Believe_ ad campaign were used as well, even after all these years those ads still hold up. Pure genius whoever came up with the idea.

End
file.